



Topic
Religion
& Theology

Subtopic
Christianity

Biblical Wisdom Literature

Course Guidebook

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Fordham University



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Biblical Wisdom Literature

Scope:

This course surveys biblical wisdom literature by a study of important scriptural texts, including Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Song of Songs (Canticle of Canticles), Daniel, Wisdom of Solomon, and selections from the Gospels as well as from the book of Psalms.

The lectures take up the array of topics and problems that are recurrent in the Bible's sapiential books, with special emphasis on the problem of the suffering of the innocent but also including such themes as friendship, virtue and vice, marriage and the choice of a spouse, decision making, life priorities, child rearing, illness, and death.

Because the parts of scripture relevant to this course are especially sacred to Judaism and to Christianity, the approach taken here tries to be respectful both to the synagogue and to the church, for both revere this material and have sophisticated ideas about the Bible and its proper interpretation. They share a reverence for the Torah, for the Prophets, and for other writings such as the Psalms that are studied in this course. What Christianity recognizes as the New Testament stands in a profound continuity with what came before, whether we think of this as the Hebrew Bible or as the Old Testament (understood as a canon of scriptural texts that includes a few additional documents that are not in the Hebrew Bible but are nonetheless connected to the chosen people of Israel). In the New Testament there are various elements that stand within the wisdom tradition, such as some of the sayings and sermons of Jesus within the Gospels, and so these too are part of our study.

The lectures in this course regularly consider the place of the sapiential books within the Bible—they are in some respects different in kind from the other books of scripture but in many respects deeply connected to the rest. Although the books of biblical wisdom literature are not the historical record of God's people, they do touch on history from time to time, as when Sirach turns to the ranks of the patriarchs for inspirational examples of virtue or when Wisdom reflects on the plagues sent upon the Egyptians to illustrate the proactive role of divine providence. Although the books of biblical wisdom literature are not legal texts, they do regularly advert to the central biblical idea of covenant as essential to a life of wisdom, precisely because wisdom requires right relation to God and it is by the covenant that

God has established the pattern for such right relationship. Although the books of biblical wisdom literature do not contain the type of magisterial pronouncements typical of the prophets, they do bear witness to the same concerns that engage the prophets, but with a more philosophical tenor in their way of addressing the pressing questions of how to live one's life, and they regularly return to the notion that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

Through a careful study of each of the sapiential books in turn, this course tries to show that the "wisdom" offered by the Bible refers to the understanding, the knowledge, the good sense, and the insight that comes ultimately from God but that is accessible to us in various ways, both by receiving the wisdom that God offers and by thinking things through for ourselves. The course suggests three primary forms of "wisdom": the wisdom that God would teach us; the wisdom that nature, cosmos, and creatures have to teach us; and the wisdom that is the result of human effort, that is the understanding of human nature and human behavior that arises from reflection on experience.

Because of the centrality of the notion of covenant in biblical theology, the course turns at a number of crucial places to a consideration of the historical record of divine initiatives in making a covenant with the chosen people and to a study of the theology of the covenant. This involves reflection on the biblical texts that deal with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Christ. In particular, the change made in the covenant at the time of Noah proves to be of special importance for understanding the problem of the suffering of the innocent.

A course such as this also needs to be attentive to various questions about the texts of scripture under study. For this reason, the lectures frequently take up issues of authorship, date of composition, textual problems, and the range of possible interpretations. The course tries to present the best of contemporary scholarship as well as a reverence for traditions of interpretation that have been prominent in various streams of thought within Judaism and Christianity.

While the course does not try to be a philosophy course, there are places where comparisons with certain philosophical ideas and schools of thought need to be discussed—on the problem of suffering raised by the book of Job and the relation of human suffering to God, for instance. This course also addresses some philosophical notions in the discussion of death and

immortality in relation to sapiential books such as Wisdom of Solomon and the Gospels.

Finally, throughout the course, there is a consistent effort to call upon human experience, both the experience of the writers of these sapiential books and the experience of those listening to these lectures. One of the important senses of wisdom, after all, is the wisdom that is the fruit of human efforts to understand God, the world, and human nature. Accordingly, the lectures try to make this material accessible both for believers and nonbelievers, for those who are already adherents of the revealed religion and for those still searching. The material certainly lends itself to an open-ended reflection of this sort, for biblical wisdom literature often presses hard on life's important questions and tries to stretch the limits of our imaginations. The problem of suffering is a good example of this, for suffering can prompt deep questions of faith, especially when a person doubts the justice of God or suspects that there must be some guilt deep within as the reason for the suffering being experienced. This course tries to plumb the texts of biblical wisdom and to offer some important distinctions in order to clarify our thinking about these matters. It also tries to reflect on the value of prayer and on the virtue of compassion in accompanying those whose suffering we cannot alleviate.

Lecture One

Introduction to Biblical Wisdom Literature

Scope: This lecture uses the wisdom story recounted in the book of Job as an example of the intriguing lessons that can be found in biblical wisdom literature. The calamities suffered by Job raise important questions about the meaning of life and the problem of suffering. We will take note of the way in which there is recurrent attention throughout the Bible to such perennial problems as why sometimes the innocent suffer while the wicked prosper. Besides reviewing other topics that are treated in the Bible's sapiential books (such as the education of the young, the choice of friends and spouses, the nature of virtue and vice), this lecture also provides an outline of the course as a whole and some suggestions about translations.

Outline

- I.** This course will concern one of the less known parts of the Bible—the books that are called biblical wisdom literature, such as the haunting story of Job's afflictions and the constant exhortations to fidelity in Proverbs and Sirach.
- II.** What does the Bible have to say about the problem of the awful things that sometimes happen to good people?
 - A.** The problem of suffering is a common perspective for reading the Bible. On a question like this, we often have in mind people of our own acquaintance whose suffering we find it hard to comprehend. We may have significant suffering in our own lives, or we might be thinking about people whom we have never met but have only read about or seen on television.
 - B.** When the suffering really hits home, it is not uncommon to find some people losing their faith. Others tend to blame themselves—they have a vivid sense of the connection between sin and guilt and their consequences.

III. Why should we consider what the Bible has to say?

- A.** Believers, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, will say that we should have deep respect for the Bible because it is God's word. Even nonbelievers can profit from knowing what is in this part of the Bible.
- B.** On the question of human suffering, reflection on the Bible has a lot to teach us. Doing this can help to explain why God allows suffering and why it is inappropriate simply to start blaming oneself when suffering comes.
- C.** Suffering is just one of the important themes in the Bible's wisdom books. There will be much else to consider as well.

IV. As a philosopher, I am fascinated with biblical wisdom literature as the part of the Bible that is most philosophical. I also bring the perspective of belief from a particular faith tradition: I am a Catholic Christian, and in fact a Jesuit priest. I think that there is something from that tradition that I can bring to bear that will be of interest, both to those who share those convictions and to those who do not.

- A.** I invite you to bring your own perspectives to our study, and I hope that the discussion questions that accompany each lecture will promote a lively sharing of perspectives.
- B.** I hope that you will share my interest in this sapiential literature as an important part of the heritage of the community in which it emerged. It remains important for the Jewish community as well as for the Christian community.

V. Christians take the very center of the Bible to be the person of Christ, and it is useful to know how Christians come at this material.

- A.** According to the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, who took on human nature and became man for our salvation.
- B.** In what the New Testament records of his words and deeds, Jesus explained his own embrace of suffering in some of the same categories that earlier parts of the Bible used for handling the problem of the suffering of the innocent.
- C.** He envisioned the sacrificial offering of himself as perfecting and completing what figures such as Adam and Abraham and Isaac and Moses had begun.

- VI.** The theme of the suffering of the innocent can be found in various parts of the Bible, including Torah and the Prophets, but it is one of the particularly important themes in that portion of the Bible that is often called biblical wisdom literature, or the sapiential books of the Bible.
- A.** One way to understand biblical wisdom literature is to read it as a lengthy discussion, back and forth, on this and similar problems—a discussion in which there are quite different human points of view as well as divine revelation.
 - B.** In the course of these lectures, we will consider the range of questions typical of the sapiential books, but we do well to start with one of the most pressing questions as our opening gambit, the case of incomprehensible suffering: the case of Job.
- VII.** From the opening chapters, we learn that Job is suffering not as some kind of punishment for any crime or sin, but as a kind of test.
- A.** Trusting that Job will be faithful in bad times as well as in good, God allows Job to be tried and tested, but on the condition that his life not be taken. The losses that Satan inflicts upon Job are devastating.
 - B.** More than half of the book of Job is devoted to the conversations between Job and his three friends. These three friends assume that Job must have been guilty of something quite serious to find himself suffering so much.
 - C.** Reluctant to speculate on the possible reasons for his suffering, Job insists that he would be proven innocent if only he could have his day in court.
 - D.** God appears, refusing to submit to the court proceedings that Job has pleaded for. Satisfied, however, by Job's fidelity under such pressures, God vindicates Job's innocence and threatens to punish the presumption of Elihu and the trio of friends.
 - E.** The book of Job ends not with this tribute to Job's faith amid suffering, but with a restoration of Job's fortunes and family that seems to run against the whole thrust of the book up until that point. Some scholars think that it may have been added by thinkers whose outlook was shaped by writings like the book of Proverbs.

VIII. The anguish of Job speaks loudly to us. But there are many other types of problems that are addressed in the sapiential books. We will examine these books from a number of perspectives.

- A.** To order these lectures, we will follow a roughly chronological approach (so far as we know that chronology). We will also be attentive to the changing historical contexts as we move through the books.
- B.** There are various sources for wisdom, including experience (personal and vicarious); the advice of others (individuals and communities); and our own earnest study, especially in such areas as literature, history, and philosophy.
- C.** These texts have much to say to believer and nonbeliever alike. That is, even someone who is not a believer may find it helpful to understand more about what believers do when they pray.

IX. There are many wonderful translations of the Bible available, and we will make use of different translations as we move through the text so as to give a sample of some of the variety that is available.

Suggested Reading:

Book of Job, chaps. 1–2.

Murphy, *The Tree of Life*.

Neusner and Neusner, *The Book of Jewish Wisdom*.

Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.** For a moment, put yourself in the situation of Job, confronted by the sudden and unexpected loss of your family and your business. Where would you turn? What would you do? To whom could you go? How might you pray?
- 2.** Whom do you consider genuinely wise? What public figures strike you as having real wisdom to offer for the guidance of the community? In your own personal circle of acquaintances, who strikes you as most likely to give good advice and sound counsel? What criteria do you use for distinguishing real wisdom from its counterfeits?

3. When someone approaches you with a problem, and especially from a position of suffering and hurt, what sort of things are helpful to say and do? Are you prepared to offer prayer and compassion? Do you feel ready to accompany a person whom you cannot help in friendship, and even in silence? What would help you to be more ready?

Lecture Two

The Place of Proverbs in the Bible

Scope: This lecture provides a general orientation to one of the oldest of the wisdom books of the Bible, the book of Proverbs. This lecture will discuss the variety of forms in which wisdom can be expressed and the variety of literary genres that can be used, including the form called a proverb or maxim. After reviewing the general place of the sapiential books within the Bible, we will begin a more detailed consideration of this particular text by looking at the story told at the beginning of Proverbs about a youth who has to choose between following the advice of Lady Wisdom or Lady Folly. One promises a spicy taste of life, but this course will lead to death; the other insists that one needs to learn wisdom, including some efforts to discipline certain of our desires, in order to have a richer and fuller life. For the young man faced with this choice, and for every reader of Proverbs, the lesson is about how crucial it is to receive and to embrace a sound education in wisdom. The lecture considers materials from Proverbs, chapters 1–9.

Outline

- I.** The book of Proverbs as wisdom literature.
 - A.** There are many forms in which wisdom can be expressed. Biblical wisdom literature accordingly uses different genres, that is, literary types. Some of these genres use complex literary structures to help achieve their purpose.
 - B.** The forms taken by proverbs feature memorable turns of phrase that tend to be brief and crisp, but profound and easy to remember, something that is especially valuable in an oral culture.
 - C.** Verbal cues like rhythm, alliteration (the repetition of the same consonant sound), and assonance (the repetition of the same vowel sound) can readily assist with remembering a maxim.
 - D.** Proverbs often come in pairs that illustrate the alternatives. What the pair of proverbs supplies is a readily recognizable justification for the reasoning being used in the situation at hand.

- E. Much of this book consists precisely of collections of proverbs. Some are from Israel's own sages; others appear to be borrowed, sometimes with adaptations, from the traditions of other ancient peoples.

II. The book of Proverbs: its place within the Bible.

- A. The sacred scriptures of Judaism were written in Hebrew and constitute the bulk of what Christians call the Old Testament. From the time of Martin Luther, most Protestant churches have regarded only texts in Hebrew as belonging to the canon (the officially recognized list of books) of the Old Testament.
- B. In addition, there are texts that are clearly of ancient Jewish origin but that were written wholly or partially in Greek, Syriac, or Aramaic.
- C. The main divisions of this part of the Bible are three—the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nvi'im*), and the Writings (*Ktuvim*)—a set sometimes called TaNaK, using an acronym derived from the first letters of the Hebrew words: T, N, and K.
- D. The first five books (the Pentateuch) consist of Genesis and the four books of Torah (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).
- E. There are various books of prophecy (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 “minor prophets”) and accompanying books on the history of this period, which ranges from Judges through 2 Kings.
- F. In addition, there are other books, collectively called “the Writings,” among which are found the Psalms and the all the books of biblical wisdom literature, plus such books as Ruth, Lamentations, and Esther.
- G. Each of these groups is associated with a particular authority: the priesthood, the prophets, and the sages.

III. The opening narrative: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.

- A. The purpose of this book is to teach the ancestral wisdom of Israel.
- B. Not only do we find in the introduction to Proverbs a connection of the wisdom tradition to the biblical figure most reputed for wisdom, King Solomon, but we, the readers of this book in any age, are invited to learn the lessons of practical wisdom and discernment.

- C. The narrative that is recounted in the opening nine chapters is this: A youth has come into the city from the countryside and needs to make a choice. The options are personified in two female figures who are not explicitly identified in the text but whom I will call Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.
 - D. Lady Wisdom offers her teaching openly in the city streets: The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD. Severe perils await those who spurn her counsels.
 - E. Lady Wisdom repeatedly warns against the temptress, Lady Folly, who will appear in dark alleys at dusk, ready to teach a quite different lesson by her seductions.
 - F. Lady Wisdom's message is very sober. After recounting the rewards of living by the traditional wisdom of Israel, she warns explicitly against adultery and against laziness and deceit.
 - G. As a literary figure, Lady Wisdom will prove a model for many later writers—one thinks immediately of the guidance that Boethius receives from the female personification of philosophy and the charming guidance that Dante gets from Beatrice during the final third of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*.
 - H. It is, to be sure, very interesting that Wisdom is portrayed throughout the sapiential literature as a feminine figure.
- IV. What precisely is the teaching that Lady Wisdom has to offer? In the opening narrative we receive only small tastes of this traditional morality. The vast bulk of this wisdom is contained in the collections of proverbs that make up the rest of the book, and to that we will turn in our next lecture.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *Proverbs*.

Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*.

Zondervan New International Version Study Bible, Book of Proverbs.

Questions to Consider:

1. In the book of Proverbs, what does Lady Wisdom mean by “fear of the LORD” when she teaches: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7)?

2. What maxims do you live by? Try to name some of those that you really do tend to say, and reflect on how you use them—is it more to make decisions or more to justify your decisions to others afterward?

Lecture Three

Collections of Proverbs

Scope: This lecture will advance our study of the book of Proverbs by considering the parts of the book that follow the opening story about the alternatives offered by Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. This portion of the book is organized as a series of proverb collections, some attributed to Solomon, the king of Israel who was renowned for his wisdom, and some to other sages. We will also consider the book's historical context and take note of Israel's debt to Egypt and other cultures of the ancient Near East.

Outline

- I.** The structure of the remainder of the book of Proverbs.
 - A.** The instruction for the young that Lady Wisdom has promised to the youth in the opening narrative is contained in the various collections of proverbs that follow. These collections can be found in the materials from chapter 10 through the first half of chapter 31.
 - B.** These collections can be maddening to try to read straight through all at once, for there is no narrative thread and very little organization as regards the content. They are simply collections of proverbs and maxims that range from folk wisdom to lofty speculation on God, human nature, and the universe.
 - C.** If a maxim seems simply trite, or banal, it probably indicates that we have not yet understood what the maxim is trying to teach us. These sayings are composed with compression and wit, but it may take us some time to get the point.
- II.** The various collections of proverbs in the book of Proverbs.
 - A.** The title of the whole book comes from the heading of the first collection: "Proverbs of Solomon."
 - B.** The contrasting proverbs usually juxtapose sayings that are different in some significant way, and often the contrast between them is designed to reflect the two options indicated in the first part by Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.

- C. The synonymous proverbs tend to match up sayings that repeat the same point in different words, or something closely related.
- D. The substance of what is taught in these proverbs provides an interesting correlation of faith and reason. Although different in style from the mode of divine revelation that is typical of the Torah and the Prophets, this material regularly exhorts its audience toward piety and the traditional religious morality associated with the covenant.
- E. Although there is scholarly disagreement about the precise dating for the book of Proverbs as a whole, there are reasons for thinking that at least this first collection of proverbs has its origins in the time of King Solomon.

III. The figure of Solomon in Proverbs and in wisdom literature in general.

- A. Throughout the sapiential books of the Bible, Solomon has a reputation for great wisdom.
- B. Within the first three chapters of the 1 Kings, we find an account of the intrigue and contention that ended with Solomon's succession to the throne of his father David.
- C. Immediately after this text, we find another famous story to illustrate the gift of wisdom that Solomon received: the wise decision that he made in the case of two prostitutes who had each given birth to a child.
- D. At the end of 1 Kings 4, the author sums up the wisdom of Solomon in a passage that testifies both to the fact that wisdom was God's gift to him and that his reputation for wisdom was truly international. It also ascribes an astonishingly large number of proverbs and songs to his composition, and this is the biblical basis for the attribution of the book of Proverbs to his authorship.
- E. The argument for taking all, or at least most, of the proverbs in this book to come from the time and perhaps the hand of King Solomon thus comes not only from the assertion in 1 Kings that he was the author of some 3,000 proverbs, but also the relative tranquility made possible by his father David's establishment of the monarchy and by Solomon's institutionalization of a royal court.

- IV. Between the two collections that are associated with Solomon is a collection of “Sayings of the Wise” that has striking parallels to an Egyptian document from circa 1200 B.C. called *Instruction of Amen-em-ope*, which also contains 30 moral directives.
- A. The portions of the Egyptian document that seem to have been taken up rather directly into the text of Proverbs appear at 22:17–21 (the exhortation to learn this sort of wisdom) and at 22:22–23:11 (the first 10 precepts).
 - B. With so many sayings on so many subjects, it seems clear that these proverbs, like those that recur throughout this book, do not supply ready-made answers to our moral questions. But training in the proverbs is supposed to help to develop our conscience—our way of thinking out how to apply moral principles by good reasoning.
- V. The “Sayings of Agur” and the “Sayings of Lamuel.”
- A. The attribution of chapters 30 and 31 to figures other than Solomon is taken by many scholars as evidence that the book as a whole comes from a time later than that of Solomon.
 - B. In the “Sayings of Agur” we find, first, a suggestion about how a believer should speak with someone troubled by doubt or ignorance of God. The second section reinforces the first by giving a warning that one’s wayward deeds can easily undermine one’s noble words about the faith.
 - C. The “Sayings of Lamuel” concern an instruction that the speaker claims to have received from his mother about how a king ought to conduct himself.
- VI. We will turn to the acrostic poem about the good spouse that occurs in the final portion of the book of Proverbs in our next lecture.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*.

Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*.

Scott, *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*.

Questions to Consider:

1. A number of proverbs discuss the time needed for making a good decision—one should be neither too hasty nor too slow. What is your own practice in the matter? What do you think about someone who must “sleep on it” before deciding?
2. Proverbs occasionally takes note of the difference between sunny and optimistic dispositions and dispositions to be gloomy and pessimistic. What do you think about the idea that an education in such proverbs might help one both to identify which temperament one has and to suggest memorable phrases from the opposite viewpoint to help keep one’s perspective balanced?
3. It may be surprising to consider the Bible as including (perhaps adapting) material from other cultures—even from older cultures. What cultures do you know besides your own? What sayings or practices from these cultures can you see as having some special wisdom that is important to consider, and perhaps to adopt?

Lecture Four

The Poems of the Book of Proverbs

Scope: This lecture will consider two of the loveliest parts of the book of Proverbs: the acrostic poem about the ideal spouse in chapter 31 and the poem about the personified figure of Wisdom in chapter 8. The argument here will be that the collections of proverbs and the sayings that make up the bulk of the book constitute the advice that Lady Wisdom had promised to the youth addressed in the opening narrative. Anyone who accepts and embraces this advice will be likely to make the right choices in life, including the choice of the right sort of person for one's spouse. The book ends with the portrait of this sort of person. This lecture will also consider the poem about Wisdom whose consideration we deferred in the second lecture. This important poem deserves separate consideration not only because of its intrinsic importance but also because of the recurrence in later sapiential books of similar poetry devoted to Wisdom.

Outline

- I.** The noble portrait of a virtuous and industrious woman at Proverbs 31:10–31 can be clearly seen to be a special unit of the text by virtue of its acrostic structure (the way in which each successive line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet).
- II.** The thread of the argument.
 - A.** The youth to whom Lady Wisdom's address is directed in the opening narrative is faced with a set of life choices: Will he accept the advice of Lady Wisdom, or will he be seduced by the temptations of Lady Folly?
 - B.** The narrative itself gives only hints about the substance of Lady Wisdom's teachings. Most of her instruction is exhortatory, promising reward for good conduct and warning of the disaster that is likely to come from bad choices.

- C. One of the recurrent themes in this opening narrative is the need to choose well with regard to one's friends and especially one's spouse. Like the recurrent message of the prophets, who spoke of the covenant between the LORD and Israel using the image of marriage, and who then described idolatry as a kind of adultery, the message of Lady Wisdom also connects fidelity in marriage with fidelity in religion and morality.
- D. The large section of the text of Proverbs that follows this opening narrative presents the wisdom of Israel in the form of various collections of proverbs and sayings, some attributed to Solomon directly—or at least ascribed to Solomon in the form of sayings gathered together by the Solomon-like Hezekiah.
- E. The portrait of the ideal spouse at the end of chapter 31 seems to me to fit into the pattern of right reasoning and good choice that is being held out to the youth who is the subject of this book's concern from its start.

III. The text of Proverbs 31:10–31.

- A. We might wish that the text spoke more about how the woman who is being described here should prepare herself for her life's course. While we cannot make the text say what it doesn't say, it is at the very least obvious that the text is giving lavish praise to someone who has shown herself extremely prudent and wise.
- B. Much of this passage speaks about her business acumen—in short, her own quite distinctive and genuine form of wisdom. In consonance with the rest of the book of Proverbs, the portrait includes a proverb that uses a memorable contrast and that points success back to a religious root in fear of the LORD.
- C. While the text does not itself make the following connection explicitly, what I would like to suggest is that this portrait of such a compassionate and industrious woman not only praises her for her own wisdom but also holds out the prospect that the youth who is addressed by the text will find such a person as his spouse if he learns to choose wisely by heeding the maxims and proverbs that contain Israel's wisdom.

IV. The wisdom poem of chapter 8.

- A.** The narrative that opens the book of Proverbs is a story about the instruction of a young man so that he comes to see the significance of the choices before him.
- B.** From the stage directions contained in the first few verses of chapter 8, it is clear that we are to take the address that follows to be a speech by Lady Wisdom about the instruction she is eager to provide.
- C.** In this second segment, she connects her mode of speech to moral virtue (her words are “just,” none of them “crooked”). The implication is that those without a trained habit of careful discernment may find themselves deceived and those without knowledge could (mistakenly) find fault with what she will say.
- D.** Wisdom herself is speaking and suggesting her identification with the virtue of balanced judgment (prudence), knowledge, and good sense. She claims the virtues of good counsel and sound judgment as her attributes.
- E.** By verses 15 to 21, the focus has turned from the wisdom that even the simple and the foolish need to learn to what even kings and rulers need to learn.
- F.** Verses 22 to 31 are clearly a unit and make an extraordinary claim. There is something mystical about the vision given here—if this is a creature, then it is the very first of creatures, the ordering principle of all else that was made, and thus an explanation of the reason why one can see the signs of the Creator in all of creation.
- G.** The final portion of this passage seems to return to the voice of Lady Wisdom, again inviting the addressee to become wise by listening to the instruction of wisdom daily.
- H.** We have spent considerable time on this text, not only because of its intrinsic importance to the book of Proverbs, but also because the theme of wisdom personified will recur.

V. The resonance of the book of Proverbs can be heard elsewhere in the Bible.

Suggested Reading:

Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*.

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 393–499.

Murphy, *Proverbs*, chaps. 8, 31.

Questions to Consider:

1. Choosing a spouse certainly requires wisdom. Why do you think that some cultures assign this task to parents, and sometimes to matchmakers, rather than to those who are to be married? What are the advantages and disadvantages?
2. In our own times, individuals choose their own spouses. What virtues does an individual need to possess in order to make good decisions about how to meet people and how to eventually make a good choice? What should one look for in a spouse? What should one avoid? Granted that some of these things will vary from one individual to another, what can one say in general?
3. What do you notice about the figure of Wisdom in chapter 8? Do you think that the persona presented here is Lady Wisdom of the narrative (chapter 1 to 9)? Does this figure seem to be someone else—perhaps an aspect of God? What are the most prominent features here?

Lecture Five

The Relation of Proverbs to Covenant

Scope: This lecture will consider the relation of Proverbs and the pursuit of wisdom to the central biblical themes of Torah and covenant. It will argue for the view that the relatively optimistic vision of Proverbs is intended not as a naive metaphysical claim (viz., that the innocent and just will never suffer) but as moral exhortation (viz., that the innocent and just deserve to prosper and often do). The quasi-philosophical approach taken within books such as Job and Qoheleth accepts and affirms the covenant but challenges a certain misinterpretation of this perspective by calling into question the view that suffering presumably implies guilt. Properly understood as moral exhortation, the perspective of Proverbs on wisdom is fully in accord with the history of God's covenants with Israel. Hence, this lecture will briefly consider the history of the divine covenants that led to the Torah made in the covenant with Moses and the light that it sheds on the proper interpretation of the book of Proverbs.

Outline

- I. The correlation of actions and consequences and the vision offered in the book of Proverbs.
 - A. If asked to describe the philosophical outlook of Proverbs, I would be inclined to call it “optimistic”—not in the sense that it is only for those with a sunny disposition, but in the sense that it promises good results.
 - B. The wisdom teaching of this book thus seems to me to have three dimensions: sapiential, moral, and religious.
 - C. When we speak of a connection between rewards and good deeds or between punishments and wicked deeds, we need to ask a further question: What type of connection is being asserted?
 - D. If the connection that the book of Proverbs makes here were to be understood as a claim that one's course of action always or necessarily brings about the correlative effect, it would quickly seem a naive sort of claim, and it would be easy to become cynical.

- E. Another possibility is that the connection between moral rectitude in one's choices and prosperity and between moral failure in one's choices and suffering is a matter of wise and prudent moral exhortation.
 - F. The problem, of course, comes with mistaking moral exhortation for some unbending rule by which to predict how things will turn out in the world.
 - G. What, if anything, is God doing about all this, and how can Proverbs talk so easily about there being a divine hand at work that will prosper the virtuous and bring appropriate retribution on the wicked?
- II.** Understanding biblical wisdom literature, and Proverbs in particular, in relation to the idea of covenant.
- A. One of the most important concepts within the entirety of the scriptures is the notion of covenant. This term means the solemn agreement God has made with his chosen people.
 - B. A more complete understanding of covenant needs to include not only the prescriptions (such as the particular commandments) but also the relationship between the parties and the very process of making, or "cutting," a covenant.
 - C. Modern scholarship has noticed a striking parallel between the covenant described in Exodus and the general form of suzerainty treaties that were used among the Semitic peoples of the ancient Near East.
 - D. Although the covenant that God makes with Moses and the chosen people as described in Exodus is the prototypical case of a covenant, the Bible presents a series of such agreements. The Bible also portrays earlier and later events in covenantal terms.
 - E. The notion of covenant is of great importance for understanding all of biblical wisdom literature. One of the early instances of covenant seems to me to be of particular importance for rightly understanding the problem of interpreting Proverbs and Job that I mentioned above, namely, the covenant with Noah.
- III.** The importance of the notion of covenant for biblical wisdom literature.
- A. If we were to understand the arrangement that God makes with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as a kind of initial covenant, then we have many of the constituent elements already in place.

- B. The story of Adam and Eve is a wisdom story if ever there was one. The point is that they are not to usurp the divine role of deciding what is morally right and what is morally wrong. What is within the realm of decision is what actions they will take, not the criteria by which they ought to make their decisions.
 - C. For our purposes, what is extremely significant here and in the other stories in Genesis up until the time of Noah is that actions immediately have consequences, for good or for ill. However, by the time of Noah, the pervasiveness of moral evil stirs the LORD to send the deluge.
 - D. The covenant with Noah explains something about why bad things sometimes happen to good people—why the wicked sometimes prosper and the innocent sometimes suffer. Paradoxically, the tragedy of innocent suffering is the result of the mercy of God.
 - E. Or, to put the same point in a more philosophical way, God's self-imposed distance is a condition for human freedom. It is not that God cannot or does not sometimes act in the world, but that he acts at times and in ways that are of his own choosing.
- IV. Let's turn back from a philosophical account to biblical wisdom literature. How are we to live in a world where wickedness is allowed to thrive and can dominate innocence? This is a problem that the sapiential tradition faced not just in Job and Qoheleth but already in Proverbs.
- A. For biblical wisdom literature, God is a just judge and will eventually bring about justice. But this may not occur in the short run—it may not even occur in the course of one's own lifetime. This new situation brought about with the change to the covenant with Noah requires that we give the young and the old constant exhortation to live aright.
 - B. It is this exhortation to live virtuously that Proverbs, rightly interpreted, emphasizes.
- V. We do well to dwell just a bit longer on the perspective on wisdom that is allied to the book of Proverbs, and we will do that in the next lecture by considering some of the wisdom psalms.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *Deuteronomy*.

Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*.

Hillers, *Covenant*.

Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the central aspects of the biblical idea of the covenant? Which of these aspects are recurrent in all of the instances in which the Bible speaks of the establishment of covenant? Which parts of it receive special stress in each particular case?
2. If we were to try to see the situation from the viewpoint of the author of Proverbs, what does the covenant require? What problem does innocent suffering and unpunished wickedness pose to this viewpoint?
3. From your knowledge of the Bible, would you be inclined to say that there is just one covenant, renewed in various times and various ways, or many separate covenants? What is the difference? What does it mean to “break” a Covenant—that is, is it simply to violate one of its provisions (and thereby to incur the stipulated penalty), or is it to bring that covenant to an end (so that it no longer binds)?

Lecture Six

Interlude—Some Wisdom Psalms

Scope: This lecture will consider some of the wisdom psalms from the book of Psalms that are closely related to the pursuit of wisdom that we have been studying from the book of Proverbs. This lecture will provide a general orientation to the book of Psalms by considering the various categories of psalms and will discuss the place of the wisdom psalms within this classification scheme. It will also discuss some of the distinctive aspects of Hebrew poetry in terms of the literary form used in many of the psalms. Finally, it will offer some suggestions about the use of the psalms and other parts of scripture in praying for wisdom.

Outline

- I.** Introduction to the book of Psalms.
 - A.** The book of Psalms has long been regarded as the Bible's prayer book. It is thus central to the prayer of the Jewish people as well as to Christians. It is something that has been used not only for individual prayer but also liturgically.
 - B.** To list just the major types, there are hymns of praise, thanksgiving hymns, laments (individual and communal), royal psalms (some focusing on the LORD as king, some on an earthly king), processional psalms, wedding psalms, penitential psalms, and of special interest for this course, wisdom psalms.
 - C.** There is much evidence to say that all the psalms collected in this book were intended to be sung, generally as a kind of chant and often accompanied by some form of instrumental music.
 - D.** Various editions and translations of the Bible handle the inscriptions at the beginning of many of the psalms differently when they number the verses.
 - E.** The main difference begins with determining where the 10th psalm begins. What the standard Hebrew text calls Psalm 10 is only the second half of Psalm 9 in the Latin version called the Vulgate. Thereafter, the numbering in the Vulgate and all subsequent versions in that tradition runs one behind the numbering in editions based on the Hebrew text.

- F. For the many cases in which there are two possible numbers, the convention (which I will follow here) is to put the Hebrew number first, followed by the Vulgate number, for instance: 139 [138].

II. The structure of the book.

- A. The 150 psalms that make up the book are grouped in five collections (of unequal length), apparently to match the five books of the Pentateuch.
- B. Psalms 42 [41] to 72 [71]: a northern collection of hymns. Scholars regard this collection as “northern” because these psalms tend to use the generic word *Elohim* for God, as tended to be the case in the works that originated from the area of the 10 northern tribes.
- C. The religion of Israel was radically monotheist and insisted at all costs on the point that there is only one God. And yet the generic word for “divinity” is a plural word. Some scholars see here an anachronism hearkening back to the polytheistic culture into which God revealed himself. Some Christians have seen here a mysterious reference to the Trinity, the doctrine of one God in three persons.
- D. Note, by the way, how each of the collections is marked by a special prayer and a blessing of praise for God that serves as the last verse.

III. The use of the psalms in prayer.

- A. There is every reason to think that the psalms were used both for personal and for liturgical prayer. Even for the psalms whose context seems deeply personal, it is likely that the institution associated with the temple had much to do with saving them and gathering them into the collections that we now have.
- B. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin notes that there are four main purposes of our praying: petition, thanksgiving, praise of God, and self-searching or confessional. He explains in detail how the psalms and other written prayer texts help people to express various thoughts and feelings as well as teach us what to ask for and how to act.

- C. I think that this is generally true for Christianity also. In my own tradition as a Catholic Christian, I would note that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the same idea in slightly different words when it distinguishes blessing and adoration, petition for forgiveness, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise.

IV. Praying the wisdom psalms.

- A. There is fairly wide (but, of course, not unanimous) agreement among scholars on the list of wisdom psalms. This group includes Psalms 1, 8, 19 [18], 36 [35], 37 [36], 49 [48], 73 [72], 78 [77], 112 [111], 119 [118], 127 [126], 128 [127], and 139 [138].
- B. The other groupings of psalms have as their main functions to give praise or thanksgiving, to give voice to an individual or a communal lament, to celebrate the kingship of God or of some earthly king, to serve some liturgical function like a wedding or a procession, or to recount the great deeds of God within the history of salvation.
- C. The wisdom psalms, like the Bible's sapiential books in general, tend to focus on the divine source of wisdom and on the human need for wisdom.
- D. Psalm 1 is a reminder of where to find wisdom. It is simple and straightforward, without the complications of the problem of innocent suffering—to which we will turn in the next set of lectures on Job. After that, we will discuss a wisdom psalm that will reflect those concerns as well.

Suggested Reading:

Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, esp. 279–90.

Donin, *To Pray as a Jew*.

New King James Version of the Bible, Book of Psalms.

U.S. Catholic Church, *Catechism*, “Christian Prayer,” esp. pt. 4.

Questions to Consider:

1. As creatures with bodies as well as minds, we not only have questions about what to pray and how to pray, but of when to pray and where. Are there particular places where you like to pray? Particular times? Any particular posture that you prefer? Do you prefer to pray alone or with others? Would it be of any help to try a new place or a new time?

2. What do you understand by the meaning of the terms that the Jewish and Christian traditions have often used in regard to the purposes of prayer? For instance, what is it to give “praise”? What is it to say thanks, to be contrite, to ask a favor? Do these terms mean the same thing or something different when we direct them to God or to both other human beings and God?
3. It is gratifying when our feelings and emotions match the words of a prayer, but how about when they do not? Especially when we are part of a community, which may well be using the psalms to pray throughout the liturgical year and in reference to specific feasts and seasons, there can easily be great differences between what the words and the music are intending and how we ourselves feel. Is there a point to praying these prayers anyway? How so?

Lecture Seven

Job and the Suffering of the Innocent

Scope: This lecture will offer an overview of a second important stream of thought within biblical wisdom literature. In such books as Job and Qoheleth, we find a rather philosophical approach to the problem of innocent suffering, one that is sometimes quite skeptical in its questioning. This lecture will then provide a general orientation to the book of Job as a distinctive biblical way to pursue wisdom. We will begin our study of the text of this book by considering the book's structure and by making a suggestion about a choice of translation. It will be important to keep in mind from the start that this is a masterful wisdom story that has interesting twists and turns. It shows Job's faith in God while he struggles to endure his sufferings.

Outline

- I.** Approaching wisdom through philosophical questions, dramatic stories, and liturgy.
 - A.** Exhortation through proverbs and questioning through dramatic stories are both ways to wisdom. The wisdom teaching of Proverbs exhorts us to consider the good sense that anyone, believer or not, ought to recognize in the pattern of life commanded in the Decalogue.
 - B.** There is a second important strand in biblical wisdom literature associated in particular with the books of Job and Qoheleth. These books raise philosophical questions about the incongruities of life.
 - C.** Taking as its starting point the figure of Job, a good man who is faced with senseless suffering, the book of Job offers a distinctive path to wisdom.
- II.** Drama as a genre for pursuing wisdom.
 - A.** It is no surprise that such creative artists over the years as William Blake, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Archibald MacLeish, and Karol Wojtyła have turned to this biblical book for inspiration.

- B. Let me offer a caution that we will find it necessary to recall at various points in the course of studying the drama contained in the book of Job.
- C. Precisely out of respect for the Bible as the word of God, we (whether as Jews or as Christians) might want to say that every line in it is part of revelation and thus designed for our salvation. The problem with that viewpoint, however, is that the meaning of some individual sentences stands in opposition to the meaning of other sentences.
- D. If we agree that the book of Job is a kind of theatrical drama, it may be that the meaning of Job and the divine message of the book come from the action of the book as a whole rather than from any particular line.
- E. The book has been carefully read over the ages, and it has inspired countless theologians and philosophers. Here let me mention just one of special significance, the 12th-century rabbi Maimonides, who discusses the book of Job in his *Guide for the Perplexed*.

III. Liturgical use of the book of Job.

- A. While the book of Job is not read publicly in most traditions of Jewish liturgy in the way of the Torah and the Prophets, there are some Jewish groups that read from Job as part of their fast and mourning over such tragedies as the destruction of the First and Second Temples.
- B. During Holy Week, the Eastern Orthodox Church reads from Job as well as from Exodus, on the understanding that Exodus is the account of Israel's Passover, its liberation from Egyptian slavery, and thus a preparation for the understanding of Christ's Passover.
- C. Roman Catholicism has traditionally read from the book of Job during Matins in the first two weeks of September. In the revised version of liturgy of the hours that is now in use, this book is read during the eighth and ninth weeks of ordinary time (midsummer).

IV. The book of Job: text and structure.

- A. Given the dramatic nature of this book, I will be using one of the most reliable of modern translations, the English version called the Revised Standard Version.

- B. On the basis of other references to the character Job in scripture, most Talmudic discussion presumes Job to have been an historical person, perhaps one of the three advisors whom Pharaoh consulted before taking action against the increasingly numerous “children of Israel.”
 - C. The Talmudic tractate Bava Basra regards Moses as the author of the book. Modern scholarship is quite divided on the question of the date of the book’s origins, with some dating it from the time of David and Solomon. Others take it to have come from the time of the exile.
- V. The very structure of the book reveals much about the perspective taken here.
- A. The opening two chapters recount the story of Job as a faithful servant of God whose fidelity Satan (“the accuser”) is permitted to test by causing the loss of his possessions, his servants, his children, and his health.
 - B. Three of Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, decide to sit with him and console him during his afflictions, in a version of the traditional Jewish practice of sitting shivah.
 - C. Job complains of his afflictions and curses the day of his birth. When Job’s friends urge him to admit that it is some guilt that must have brought on this misfortune, he steadfastly insists on his innocence and demands his day in court.
 - D. These conversations occur in three cycles. The give and take of the conversation tends to break down during the third cycle.
 - E. After listening to Job’s testimony, Elihu pronounces in favor of divine justice. God then appears in a whirlwind and proclaims that divine sovereignty will not be judged.
 - F. God vindicates his servant Job, who retracts his demand for a hearing. At the LORD’s directives, Job then intercedes for his friends, and God restores what Job has lost.
- VI. Let me invite you to read the opening chapters in this masterpiece of a story. Hearing the text read with different voices may well make it all the clearer how the drama presented here unfolds.

Suggested Reading:

Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*.

The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Book of Job.

MacLeish, J. B.: *A Play in Verse*.

Wojtyła, *Job*.

Suggested Listening:

Williams, *Job: A Masque for Dancing*.

Questions to Consider:

1. It might be an interesting exercise here at the beginning of our study of the book of Job to compare your impressions before and after. What is your current understanding of each of the following?
 - a. The role of God and the role of Satan in the process by which Job is afflicted.
 - b. The general response of Job to the tragedy that strikes him.
 - c. The lesson that you think that we should learn from the story of Job.
2. I have suggested here that we read the book of Job as a kind of drama, with various characters playing their parts in the story. Now, on the assumption that no particular character alone needs to be the mouthpiece of the author (for instance, in *Macbeth* neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth nor any of the other characters alone tell us what Shakespeare thinks), how are we to figure out what the meaning of a play is? Will that help us here in understanding the story of Job?
3. Rather than curse God for his afflictions, Job curses the day of his birth. What good does that do? What do you suppose he means? What should someone do who is trying to offer compassion to a person whose suffering brings on such a state of mind?

Lecture Eight

Job—The First Cycle of Conversations

Scope: This lecture will consider the first seven chapters of the book of Job. We will first consider the problem raised by the setting of the book in God's angelic court. In the next few chapters, we encounter three of Job's friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—who have come to offer him their compassion, first in silence and then in earnest conversation. We will consider how Job mounts a defense of his innocence against the presumption of guilt that is suggested by their advice and counsel. In these conversations, there emerges a kind of debate over the question of suffering. On the assumption that the guilty deserve to suffer and with the evidence that Job is suffering, his friends conclude that Job must be guilty of something. Hence, each of them in his own way suggests that Job should simply admit to his guilt and beg for God's mercy. But Job insists upon his innocence and pleads to have his day in court so that his innocence can be established.

Outline

- I.** The affliction of Job (chapters 1–2).
 - A.** The problem that a philosophical treatise might set out abstractly is presented here in the form of a folktale or wisdom story, involving Job, the angelic court attending the LORD (including Satan), and the LORD God.
 - B.** The dramatic action that sets up the problem has six steps.
- II.** The situation here is a proverbial case of innocent, undeserved suffering.
 - A.** Some readers blanch at the prospect of God's readiness to allow Job to be subjected to so much suffering at Satan's hands. I think that the setting of the stage is not a theological comment on the nature of God but rather a forceful literary device for establishing the problem of undeserved suffering.
 - B.** When three of Job's friends hear about his disasters, they decide to offer him sympathy and consolation.

- C. When Job breaks the silence, it is to curse the day of his birth. He does so in a long soliloquy that constitutes the whole of chapter 3. I suspect that the point of this magnificent touch is to show that Job genuinely feels—in fact, is utterly consumed by—the pain.
 - D. When someone who is suffering however much says so, whether in the eloquent lament of Job or in some broken sobbing or in the repetitious, hard-to-listen-to tones of self-pity that may even verge into attempts to manipulate those of us listening, the response has to be compassion.
- III.** The first cycle of Job's conversations with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar sets a pattern that will continue into a second and a third cycle, through chapter 27. In each cycle, one of the friends speaks for a while and then Job responds.
- A. The first speech of Eliphaz expresses complete confidence in God's goodness and justice, urging Job to accept the correction with which God is apparently chastising some fault of Job's.
 - B. Apparently during their week of silent commiseration, Eliphaz has had a vision in his sleep, a message from heaven that is not merely human knowledge but divine revelation.
 - C. The proper course, he counsels Job, is simply to admit his guilt and appeal to God for mercy. Confident in divine justice and mercy, Eliphaz promises Job rich blessings if only he will heed this counsel and plead with God in confession of his sin.
 - D. In his first reply to Eliphaz, Job pleads for sympathy in his pain but steadfastly insists on his innocence.
 - E. Incensed that Eliphaz should even suggest that the present suffering is punishment for some special guilt, Job defends himself with verve.
 - F. In these bitter lines, we hear the groaning of a soul that can only see misery ahead. The reference to Sheol has its usual mystery about it. It is a way of speaking of approaching death.
 - G. Job's final words of this speech seem directed not so much to Eliphaz as to God—in this respect they are true to form and entirely like the words we are likely to hear from someone in pain.

- IV. For the author of this book to include such an emotional passage—one full of bitterness over God’s watchful care, as if it amounted to a nosy, excessive scrutiny—is surely significant.
- A. What should we make of it? It is not Job’s final word, any more than the grouching of anyone who is suffering anything is the final word of that person. But it is a necessary stage to go through.
 - B. Dealing straightforwardly with God about how miserable we may feel is wise advice, for it keeps us in prayerful conversation.
 - C. With these haunting thoughts of Job in mind, we will turn in the next lecture to the second and third conversations that Job has with his friends.

Suggested Reading:

Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job*.

Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, chap. 2.

Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, chap. 3.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Job reacts rather angrily to the suggestion from his wife that he curse God and die. What do you think that Job’s wife means? Why does he get so angry? What are we to learn from their exchange?
- 2. In the conversation between Eliphaz and Job, there is some discussion of how easy it is to say high-principled things when someone else is the one who has to suffer. But often such things are taken quite differently from the way in which they are intended by the one who is suffering. What is your experience here? Do you have any good strategies for helping others to grasp what you mean? To make sure that you have grasped what they mean?
- 3. Why do you suppose that Job’s three friends sat for a whole week with Job in silence? Do you have any rules of thumb by which to decide when to speak and when to be silent, especially in the face of suffering?

Lecture Nine

Job—Deepening the Conversation

Scope: This lecture will analyze the remaining portion of the first cycle of speeches in some detail and then reflect on the logic of the argument. The repetitious nature of the discussion makes it clear that Job's friends are all presuming that suffering implies guilt. In a way, these speeches can be seen as exemplifying the sort of misinterpretation of the book of Proverbs that we discussed in Lecture Five. The inference that the friends make from the fact of Job's suffering that he must be guilty of the sort of crime that merits such suffering turns out to involve some faulty logic. Job does eventually admit that he is not sinless, but he continues to insist that he is guilty of nothing so grave as to deserve as much suffering as he is now experiencing. We will then consider the idea that the author is thereby suggesting, that there are other reasons why suffering occurs in the world besides divine retribution.

Outline

- I. In the previous lecture, we examined the first speech of Eliphaz and Job's reply in considerable detail. Mindful of the counterpoint style of argumentation here, we will now examine the remainder of the first cycle of speeches and then reflect for a bit on the nature of the argument that Job's three friends are employing in their conversation.
- II. Where Eliphaz mounts an argument, Bildad apparently thinks it enough to witness to God's unwavering justice.
 - A. As in so much of Hebrew poetry, the verse here involves neither rhythm nor rhyme, but simply the use of juxtaposition and repetition, as when it refers to the sins of the son and the sins of the father, and the return of God's favor to anyone who pleads with God and the return of favor that Job may expect.
 - B. The balance of Bildad's speech consists of variations on this theme that God will deal justly with those who return to him but will surely punish the wicked.

- C. In reply, Job offers a distinction: While clearly the judgments of God cannot be wrong, his present suffering should not be regarded as a case of divine judgment on his guilt. Job begins by affirming the picture of God that Bildad has just drawn.
- D. It is interesting, of course, that the Bible uses not just one name for God but several names. We have already commented on the way in which the word *Adonai* (the LORD) is substituted for the unpronounceable tetragrammaton Y-H-W-H. Here in these texts we see another name: *El Shaddai* (God Almighty).
- E. Job assures Bildad that he would never dare to put God on trial or claim that he is in the right against God; although he is mindful of no guilt, perhaps he should doubt his innocence.
- F. What Job wants is vindication that his suffering is the result of no deed of his own. With that he could perhaps endure the pain.
- G. Better not to be the object of divine scrutiny. As we noted toward the end of the reply to Eliphaz, Job has no sense of any hope on this side of the grave or beyond.

III. Zophar's first speech and Job's reply.

- A. Already with Zophar's entry into the conversation, we get the sense that there is little new to say, however many ways there are to say it.
- B. In reply to Zophar's certainty that Job's suffering must be due to some guilt, Job's lengthy reply stresses four points.
 - 1. The judgments of the Almighty are, no doubt, inscrutable, especially when the wicked seem to prosper and the innocent suffer.
 - 2. God's rightness does not need defense, but the fact of suffering does not prove the innocent guilty.
 - 3. Using the rhetoric of the law courts, Job simply pleads that his case be heard.
 - 4. The only response that one can rightly make to tragic suffering is to voice an elegy on human misery.

IV. The logic of the case.

- A. If one takes the exhortations typical of Proverbs as if they gave us certain knowledge of how reality is going to turn out, the suffering of the innocent will be incomprehensible.

- B. Our analysis of the text thus far indicates that the three friends of Job are all making the assumption that Job's suffering implies some guilt on his part. But trusting in divine mercy, they urge him to admit his guilt so that he can make amends with God.
 - C. Consider, if you will, how the reasoning works for if-then (conditional) arguments.
 - D. The technical problem with the logic here is called "affirming the consequent," for "the consequent" is the technical name for the "then ..." statement within a conditional (the "if ... then ..." sort of statement with which the argument began).
 - E. Let's now apply this aspect of conditional logic to the basic argument of Job's friends.
 - F. Clearly, what they want to conclude is, "Therefore, Job, you must have acted wickedly," but their conclusion that suffering implies sin is no more valid than concluding that it must be raining outside simply because the sidewalk is wet.
 - G. I rest confident that you will find that the logic here always works if you state the conditional correctly, that is, put the condition that must be met in the "if ..." part of the sentence and the result in the "then ..." part of the sentence.
- V. My point, of course, is not that the book of Job is merely an exercise in logic, but simply that there is a logical error that is made by Job's friends. He rightly resists this error when he insists that wickedness does deserve punishment that will cause suffering and that there are other explanations for suffering besides the punishment due to wickedness.
- A. What makes the three friends of Job inclined to do what they do, I suspect, is their deep-seated acceptance of the type of exhortation that we found to be typical of Proverbs and their forgetfulness of the change in the situation since Noah.
 - B. By reason of the change in the covenant, no longer will the punishment for wickedness come about quite so directly; rather, God will rain upon the just and the unjust alike.

- C. We know the prologue and thus we know what Job does not know, that his suffering comes from the wiles of Satan and not from his sin. But perhaps by this brief foray into the logic of the argument, we can put aside the false notion that suffering is always due to some previous sin and turn back to the profound problem of the suffering of the truly innocent.
- D. As we continue to ponder this topic, we will be able to resist faulty interpretations of the Bible and thereby get a better understanding of what the Bible does have to say about suffering. We will do this in the next lecture by looking at the second and third rounds of conversations between Job and his friends.

Suggested Reading:

Browne and Keely, *Asking the Right Questions*.

Habel, *The Book of Job*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Neither Job nor his friends seem to envision an afterlife. What difference, if any, would belief in life beyond the grave have meant?
2. Stoicism offers its own answer to the prospect of pain and suffering: the cultivation of indifference to anything outside of one's control. Is Job a stoic here? If not, how is his view different? Which seems better?
3. What is the view of God that Job and his three friends have? What is the basis of their confidence in God here?

Lecture Ten

Job—Second and Third Conversation Cycles

Scope: The second and third cycles of conversation between Job and his three friends repeat some of the arguments from the first cycle, and they may even seem a bit dull as a result. After considering this material, we will take note of a problem in the text and suggest that the author may be intending something with dramatic significance by having the argument peter out before the third speaker has his expected say. We will also reflect on the notion that Job's resistance to their arguments comes not from blindness to his moral failings but from his conviction that the measure of his suffering is out of all proportion to any guilt and so must have another explanation.

Outline

- I. In the second set of speeches, Eliphaz and Job spar on the question of presumption.
 - A. Contrasting Job with Adam, Eliphaz speculates that Job's protestation of his own innocence is a sign of his desire to conceal his guilt.
 - B. Job's initial response to Eliphaz strikes me as something not unlike the way in which we might get a desolating reaction from someone suffering whom we have tried to comfort.
 - C. Job quickly enough moves beyond the understandable self-pity to a prayer of trust. It is not without reason, I think, that Christian readers have sometimes likened Job's prayer here to the use that Jesus made of Psalm 22 on the cross.
 - D. Bildad takes issue with what he regards as Job's fatalism, that is, with what he perceives to be a resignation to unavoidable destiny.
 - E. In some of the most famous lines in the entire book, Job retorts that his stance is not fatalism but faith.
- II. Zophar's second speech and Job's reply.
 - A. Zophar's contribution to the second round of speeches appeals to the record of history.

- B. Although Zophar does not explicitly mention Job, every line he speaks (20:2–29) makes precisely the same point, that God will eventually punish the evildoer.
- C. The application to the present case that Zophar intends by implication is clearly not lost on Job, whose answers sharply contradict Zophar's reasoning.
- D. Although Job does not mention here the change in the covenant that comes with Noah, the substance of Job's remarks about our inability to understand how God judges are in accord with the dispensation in force after Noah.

III. The dramatic significance of the interruption of the third round of speeches (22:1–27:24).

- A. Eliphaz argues his own position with persistence; Job is sure that he would be acquitted if only he could defend himself before God.
- B. Job does not so much respond directly to Eliphaz as repeat his desire to be tried before God. He feels sure that he would be acquitted.
- C. Zophar's third speech strikes Job as merely tiresome and empty words. As before, Zophar emphasizes the perfection of divine justice and presumes that human suffering must be regarded as just recompense for some sort of sinfulness.
- D. With growing impatience, Job's reply to Zophar is nothing short of sarcastic.

IV. Textual problems and perhaps a dramatic turn of events.

- A. In the received text, the material from 26:5 to 26:14 is assigned to Job, but its content is at odds with his position. Hence, many editions print it as part of Bildad's speech and then connect 26:1–4 to the text that begins at 27:1 as the next speech of Job.
- B. Although the material that runs from 27:13 to 27:24 is assigned to Job rather than to one of his friends, it runs entirely counter to the views that he has been expressing and will continue to maintain below (29:1–31:40).
- C. Some editions (such as *The Jerusalem Bible*) assign this material to Zophar, in order to fill out the picture and give him a third speech here in the third cycle. That is certainly possible.

- D. Let me suggest another possibility: Imagine the conversation between Job and his friends as breaking off from the fine, orderly cycles that we have been observing and as descending into something more chaotic, with several people trying to speak at once, or before others have finished.
 - E. Perhaps the textual problem of material inconsistent with the characters to whom these speeches have been assigned could be explained in this way: The conversation has just gotten frustrating and even a bit sharp. Job's friends cannot even think of a new way to make their point, and he is getting tired of listening to the same old point.
- V. Whatever we make of the textual problems here, I find it fascinating that the very next material in the text (chapter 28) is a wisdom poem, in the tradition of Proverbs 8, and then the conclusion of the dialogue with the three friends. I leave you here with the thought that perhaps the character of Job (or perhaps the book's author) is tuning out the babble of his friends for a moment and simply giving a moment to praise Wisdom before returning to the drama.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, chap. 4.

Zuck, *Sitting with Job*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do you consider to be the essence of the argument that the three friends of Job so insist upon throughout this conversation? Try to see the issue from their viewpoint and to state their case as strongly as you can.
2. What do you take to be the essence of Job's response to this argument? We have seen Job's way of putting his response to his friends. If you were he, how would you try to make them understand your case?
3. Sometimes, conversations like these are not meant to settle a question but constitute a way to be a companion for someone in suffering, that is, a way to be compassionate by keeping someone company. What do you think are good and suitable ways for supporting someone in suffering that you cannot simply relieve or remove?

Lecture Eleven

Job—The Wisdom Poem and the Conclusion

Scope: This lecture will discuss the wisdom poem that appears in chapter 28 and then analyze the final portion of Job's dialogue with his three friends. We will take note of the shift in the dramatic action at that point to a new character and a new subject. In this lecture, we will also consider the figure of Job as a pattern for spiritual discernment in times of trouble, that is, for trying to figure out what God may be telling us and what guidance God may be giving us. We will consider this especially in light of the wisdom poem and the nature of Job's defense of himself in these conversations.

Outline

- I. The next passage in the text is a wisdom poem (28:1–28). What does it say, and what is it doing here? Let us first consider the poem itself and then ask our questions about its possible place in this drama.
 - A. The poem has three stanzas. Whereas the wisdom poem in Proverbs 8 involves the personified figure of Wisdom singing the advantages of acquiring wisdom, the perspective of this poem is different: a testimony to the transcendent character of divine wisdom.
 - B. The first stanza compares the search for wisdom to the search for precious metals and concludes that wisdom cannot be found by the sort of search that yields silver and gold.
 - C. According to the second stanza, human beings do not know how to obtain this priceless treasure on their own.
 - D. In the final stanza comes the answer: God alone knows, both in the order of nature and in human affairs.
- II. There are various items to note in the last stanza.
 - A. The first verse in the third stanza may perhaps be a repudiation of the ancient practice of divination and augury by tracking the flight of various birds.

- B. The middle verses have often been cited, as when Augustine observes that God ordered the world according to weight, number, and measure. This passage thus alludes to the tradition of discovering wisdom in the nature that God has created.
- C. The final line is quite explicit in holding to a very traditional theme of wisdom literature: Wisdom involves the fear of the LORD, and understanding involves the avoidance of wickedness. This is then a reminder to continue to seek justice even if neither reward nor punishment is coming immediately.

III. What are we to make of this poem and its placement here in the text?

- A. It sounds a bit odd on the lips of Job. If anything, it anticipates the answer that God will deliver to Job's questions in chapters 38–39.
- B. While we should always be wary of the dramatic fallacy, that is, taking the lines assigned to a given character in a play as if they were the views of the author, the author of a play often does want to provide a clear statement of the theme.
- C. One way to do this is to let the audience draw the conclusion from the resolution of the plot, or perhaps from the emotions that the fate of the characters has elicited.
- D. Yet another way is to have some lines within the play clearly set off from the rest—a moment out of time and apart from the narrative and thus a way to speak directly to the audience from the author's own point of view.
- E. In this vein, I would propose that the wisdom poem of chapter 28, whose placement in the text has rightly presented so many questions to biblical scholars, might involve something like this: Perhaps it is an interlude in which we really ought to be hearing a voice from the angelic council that opened the book.
- F. Perhaps we should hear it as coming from within the mind of Job. Tired of the way in which his discussion with the three friends has been degenerating, his mind wanders and he finds himself meditating in this way.

- IV. The lengthy soliloquy that brings the conversation to a close (29:1–31:40) falls quite naturally into three parts: Job’s nostalgia for his previous happiness, a lament for his current misery, and a solemn defense of his innocence.
- A. Perhaps in response to the severe picture of the miserable fate awaiting the wicked, Job returns from the moment of reverie that was the wisdom poem (chapter 28) by remembering the happiness that he once had.
 - B. The contrast between such halcyon days and present misery could not be more stark.
 - C. Job feels utterly abandoned, especially by God, but he will not yield to the pressure of his friends and say what is false.
 - D. Job asserts that he has observed the traditional wisdom of Israel, in accord with the commandments and the exhortations of Proverbs, and can testify that his conscience is clear and he is ready to be judged.
- V. A reflection on spiritual discernment.
- A. Before we move on to the next part of this play, it may prove helpful to make a few remarks on spiritual discernment.
 - B. The feelings associated with desolation are real, and there is no point in denying them. One of the aspects of the character of Job that may be particularly important for us to notice here is the way in which he does not hide the desolation that he feels.
 - C. In the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, he calls upon a piece of ancient wisdom—that the devil is the father of lies—to point out that desolation can lead us to bad decision making (see John 8:44).
 - D. What is crucial is to spot the untruth that is bending us out of shape and distorting our perspective. Spotting the distortions can often remove the self-pity that we might be feeling or the inclination to make a bad decision in a time of desolation.
 - E. This course of action does not solve all of Job’s problems, but it lets him examine his conscience well and put his mind at rest as he prepares to face the next struggle.

Suggested Reading:

Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the main features of the wisdom in the poem in chapter 28? How does this poem compare with the poems in Proverbs 8 and (if you want to look ahead) Sirach 24?
2. Here is a spiritual exercise you might want to try. The next time you find that you are “replaying the tape” of some difficult conversation or angry moment over and over again in the course of the day, try this: (1) Eject that tape from your mind (as often as you need to do so!), (2) send it to the “dead letter office” by express mail, (3) but promise yourself that you will examine the episode that has you so upset in the context of a prayerful examination of conscience before you retire for the evening. When you do this, do you find that you can get a little more objectivity and truthfulness than if you allow the anger to build every time you replay the tape? On the other hand, if you replay the tape again and again, do you get closer to the truth, or do you distort the matter in your own favor?

Lecture Twelve

Job—Elihu's Defense of God's Honor

Scope: This lecture will consider the final two sections of the book of Job. The first of these presents Elihu, a young man who has been listening to these conversations and is enraged at Job's three friends for giving up the argument. By doing so, they seem to him to have impugned the justice of God. Exasperated by Job's lack of remorse, Elihu charges Job with various sorts of injustice. Yet by trying to defend God's honor in this way, he makes a curious reversal: Instead of the legal proceedings for which Job had been calling as a way to prove his innocence, it suddenly seems that God is the one on trial. In the second section, we have the resolution and denouement: God suddenly appears in a whirlwind, utterly ignoring his would-be defender Elihu and refusing to be judged. We will examine his affirmation of Job's fidelity and his restoration of Job's fortunes.

Outline

- I. The speeches of Elihu.
 - A. The sudden outburst of the young Elihu provides an unexpected turn of events after the triple cycle of conversations between Job and his three friends.
 - B. As a younger man, Elihu had deferred to his elders. But their inability to refute Job leads him to offer what he admits will be a different line of argument.
 - C. Given the habitual association of wisdom in Proverbs and thus far in Job with tradition and old age, this figure recalls us to one of the important questions of biblical wisdom literature: its source.
 - D. We will need to keep this question in mind as we proceed, for there is clearly value in all three: in personal reflection on experience, in what nature has to teach, and in the revealed word of God in scripture.

II. Elihu's indictments against Job and against his three friends.

- A.** The three friends had focused their conversations on an appeal to Job to repent. They tended to presume that Job must have been guilty of something, but they never quite formulated the argument precisely enough to spot the logical fallacy that we noted.
- B.** By contrast, Elihu is on the attack. Even what sounds at first like deference really amounts to a challenge to debate.
- C.** Like a prizefighter who alternates attack and feint, Elihu launches into his accusation by quoting Job's own words of complaint as if they were not simply lament about his misery but as if they put God in the wrong.
- D.** For Elihu, the problem is not that God does not speak but that human beings are oblivious to the many ways in which he speaks.
- E.** God's ways of speaking include dreams and visions; the voice of conscience, especially in times of suffering; and even the stirrings and promptings of what subsequent tradition has come to call one's guardian angel, who often comes when one is asleep.
- F.** Elihu bids Job to keep silence, for he has more to say; then after inviting Job to make a response if he can, he shushes him again with something that seems hard to interpret as anything but brusque arrogance.
- G.** The next attack is upon Job's three friends, whom Elihu considers to have failed in defending God.
- H.** Elihu insists on the omnipotence and omniscience of God.
- I.** In response to the objection that some who are known to be wicked are permitted to prosper unpunished, Elihu characterizes God's delay in delivering judgment as a case of mercy tempering judgment.

III. Elihu on the divine purpose in Job's suffering.

- A.** The final portion of Elihu's speech begins by raising the interesting question of how sin hurts, or in any way affects, God.
- B.** Elihu's conception of God includes what philosophers would call "impassibility"—that is, God is transcendence and cannot be harmed by any human sin. Sin offends God, but it is human beings whom sin hurts.

- C. Taking the same basic line now that the three friends had taken, Elihu presumes that the suffering must somehow be guilty and puts enormous trust in the power of suffering to arouse the conscience to repentance.
- D. He concludes with an elaborate hymn on divine omnipotence that includes, as we have seen before, an intriguing allusion to rain, and in fact to the prospect of a deluge, in close proximity to various lines about God's judgment.

IV. Theophany: God's appearance out of the whirlwind.

- A. Suddenly, in a development utterly unexpected, the LORD appears, dismissing Elihu's "words without knowledge" and putting Job on the witness stand for the trial he has been demanding.
- B. For 70-some verses over two chapters, the LORD grills Job with questions.
- C. Job may have wanted a trial before God, but his reply at this point is a simple surrender.

V. God's second speech and Job's reply.

- A. After Job's humble capitulation, God speaks again, in two lengthy descriptions of the divine power used in creating the world.
- B. Job is suitably impressed and replies.

VI. There is still a short epilogue. It suggests an important question about the meaning of the whole book, and we will take it up at the start of the next lecture.

Suggested Reading:

Dell, *Shaking a Fist at God*.

Estes, *Handbook*, 11–139.

Perdue and Gilpin, *The Voice from the Whirlwind*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. If you have not yet read to the end of the book of Job, it may prove interesting at this point to stop and reflect: How do you expect this book to end? Will it prove a tragedy in which Job must now somehow go on with life? Will it have a happy ending, with the restoration of Job's fortunes? If you were the author, how would you end it?

2. Why do you suppose that God refuses to be judged? What do you take to be the main points in the addresses that God delivers in his part of the book? How do you understand the relatively lengthy poems about Leviathan and Behemoth?
3. Try comparing the speeches by Elihu from the previous section with the speeches of God in this section. Does Elihu faithfully present God's viewpoint, or is there some significant difference here?

Lecture Thirteen

Job—Reflections on the Book as a Whole

Scope: In the previous six lectures, we have analyzed the text of Job. In this lecture we will look at the restoration of Job's fortunes at the end of the book and then reflect on the book of Job as a whole to consider the lessons provided by the entire story as a specifically biblical approach to the problem of suffering. We will also explore the philosophical question of theodicy (the effort to justify the ways of God). We will thereby have a chance to compare the biblical perspective offered in this book and in related parts of the Bible to some of the philosophical approaches that have been taken on this problem. This lecture will offer a brief account of the views of such figures as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and C. S. Lewis to help provide the necessary comparisons.

Outline

- I. The book of Job as a response to the problem of suffering.
 - A. The epilogue to the book of Job switches back from poetry to prose at 42:7. This presumably signals an end to the drama that we have been watching and a return to the perspective of the narrative from chapters 1–2 that provided a kind of framework.
 - B. After Job has interceded for his friends, the LORD then gives Job double what he had before. His relatives and friends—presumably those who abandoned or ignored him rather than commiserating with him in the fashion of the three friends described earlier in the text—give him silver and gold, and the LORD himself blesses Job with sheep, camels, oxen, and eventually 10 new sons and daughters.
 - C. There are, of course, many of us who just can't manage a story without a happy ending. But there are also scholars who have raised the question of whether this happy ending really fits the story.
 - D. This is an important question for each of us to consider. As one way to help us do that, I would like to depart from the book of Job for the remainder of this lecture and consider some of the other ways in which this topic can be handled.

- II.** The efforts to produce a philosophical theodicy.
- A.** Whatever we are to make of the ending of the text of Job as we have it, perhaps we can agree that the bulk of the book is about the question of suffering when it is not clear (at least not yet) how things will turn out in life.
 - B.** One of the problems presented both by life and by the text of Job is how God in his goodness could allow innocent suffering at all. In this respect, the biblical wisdom books provide a place for a kind of philosophical debate within Israel, for we see the issue being examined from various perspectives. Over the course of history, there have been many philosophers who have tried to resolve that problem.
 - C.** Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz tried to justify the apparent imperfections within this world by arguing that this world must actually be the best of all possible worlds because it was created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God.
 - D.** The long-lived Charles Hartshorne was a prominent American exponent of what is called process philosophy or process theology—so named because of the priority given to change and experience over the categories of form and substance that were prominent in classical metaphysics.
 - E.** Faced with what Hartshorne regarded as the insoluble paradoxes involved in trying to reconcile the presence of so much suffering in the world with the traditional doctrines of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, Hartshorne and other process thinkers have argued that we need to change our view of God in regard to at least one of these three attributes.
 - F.** Harold Kushner is an American rabbi and the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner repudiates the notion that suffering is a punishment by God for misdeeds. He also rejects the view, associated with Sirach, that God sometimes uses suffering to teach people some important lessons. Kushner holds that human beings are unique in this world by virtue of having the power to make free choices and that God refuses to intervene in these choices.
 - G.** Kushner does agree that God can grant us sufficient strength to deal with the troubles in our life, so it makes sense to pray.

- H. C. S. Lewis, the famous literary scholar, novelist, and Christian apologist, has popularized an argument that is at least as old as Augustine in the second chapter of his book *The Problem of Pain*. In short, for God to have created a world in which there are beings endowed with the power of free choice, God has also chosen to allow any number of instances of innocent suffering.

III. Returning to the perspective of the book of Job.

- A. There is at least some progress that comes by eliminating erroneous views. It seems to me that what a number of our philosophers share with the book of Job is a rejection of an erroneous answer: the uncritical assertion that all suffering is somehow a divine punishment.
- B. There is something right and proper about fair trials, appropriate kinds of imprisonment and fines, and even the pains that we will have to await in the afterlife because of responsibility for guilt that was never properly addressed in this life. But we cannot put God into a box of our own devising, as if God were an absolutely perfect computer-switching system.
- C. Likewise, there are some actions that have immediate consequences of their own: consistent overeating, overindulgence in alcoholic drinks, or taking drugs. But not all actions have immediate retributive consequences for the wrongdoer.
- D. Suffering does have meaning as a punishment when it is connected with some fault. But it is a mistake to envision all suffering here on earth as indicative of some sort of guilt, as we saw when we analyzed the logic of the argument used by Job's friends.

IV. The need for prayer.

- A. When the Bible itself, in the book of Job, presents to us frankly and openly the problem of the suffering of an innocent person, it seems to me that it is pointing to the reality of an important problem.
- B. It may be possible to provide an explanation like that of Leibniz or Hartshorne, or perhaps better, that of Kushner or Lewis. It seems to me that each of them throws some light on this problem.

- C. My own view is that the book of Job is not the Bible's last word on that subject. For myself, I think of it as foretelling the passion of Christ. The book of Job seems to me to pose the question but not fully to give the answer to that question.
 - D. The book of Sirach will have other things to say, and the Gospels will have yet more—a suggestion that out of suffering can come good, through mercy.
- V. In the next lecture we will turn to a consideration of the Psalms and thus to prayer in times of suffering.

Suggested Reading:

Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*.

John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*.

Kirzner, *Making Sense of Suffering*.

Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Leibniz, *Theodicy*.

Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why do some thinkers hold that the reality of suffering means that God must be imperfect, lacking in knowledge, or lacking in goodness? How do you see it?
2. Why do some thinkers insist that suffering is inevitable in a world in which human beings really do have the power of free choice? What is the connection here? Do you agree?
3. Considering everything that we have studied thus far, what do you think the book of Job contributes to the discussion?

Lecture Fourteen

Interlude—Prayer in Times of Suffering

Scope: There are a number of psalms that pertain quite directly to the problem of suffering. This lecture will discuss some of the psalms that make up this group within the Psalter and will reflect on the importance of praying for compassion as well as for wisdom in the face of suffering. A number of the psalms to be considered in this section are often linked with the hymns of the suffering servant in Isaiah. This lecture will also try to offer some suggestions about praying the psalms.

Outline

- I.** Prayer as communication with God.
 - A.** One of the great paradoxes in anyone's relationship with God is that feeling of a need to express oneself, even though we grant that God already knows what we are thinking and feeling.
 - B.** Even those who do not count themselves as believers may well find this question interesting intellectually in the effort to understand how believers see reality.
 - C.** I offer these remarks not only with an eye to the history of prayer in the specific traditions of Judaism and Christianity, but with a hope of opening up a discussion about the possibilities of prayer today.
 - D.** Even though an omniscient God already knows what we are thinking, there is still much point in prayer of all types—largely because it is doing what God told us to do. The Bible regularly testifies to the fact that God summons us to prayer.
 - E.** The need for prayer comes from our need to stand in right relation to God, precisely as human beings made in his image and likeness who need God. It is God who asks us to acknowledge the truth of the situation and then, consciously and deliberately, to stand in this position.

II. The various types of prayer.

- A.** There are various purposes and reasons for which a person might want to pray, and various kinds of prayer that can be helpful for those purposes.
- B.** In this lecture, I want to focus on the possibilities for praying specifically in times of suffering and to learn what guidance biblical wisdom literature and the Psalms may have to offer.
- C.** One of the lessons that the book of Job teaches in an interesting way is that we cannot control God. The characters in this story experience that point rather directly when God suddenly appears in the whirlwind and refuses to be judged.
- D.** The human desire to be in control of things is very understandable. But experience teaches that such personal control is not always possible. For instance, one of the lessons that those who have participated in 12-step programs have learned is that admitting that we are not in control of the grand picture is a crucial step for us to take.
- E.** We can always make those requests in prayer, regardless of how we have conducted ourselves before that time. But frankly, we will feel ourselves in better position to make those requests in our times of trouble if we have a habit of praying, a habit of conversing with God.

III. Asking for God's attention and care.

- A.** At one point in the story, Job is extremely frank, wishing that God would simply ignore him rather than pay so much excruciating attention.
- B.** In a passage like this, Job is complaining about God's excessive care for him as if it were a relentless scrutiny, focused on a minute examination of every moment and every action, to find out whatever he might have done wrong.
- C.** I suspect that Job is tempted here by a kind of desolation to take the very stance that his friends have been urging: He is suffering, so he must be guilty. Why can't God just look the other way? What would be the harm?

- D.** I know an elderly gentleman who had a stroke that took away his voice and left him considerably paralyzed. Needless to say, on some days the feelings of rage at his condition and anger with God just overwhelm him. His dear wife sometimes calls me, and I go and have a little chat with George.
- 1.** In various ways, what I try to tell George is this: It's okay to tell God you're angry—even that you're angry with God himself. God is big enough to take it, and I am utterly positive that God would rather have your attention than be ignored.
 - 2.** I think that this brings out something important about what the wisdom psalms have to tell us, about talking to God as plainly and directly as we can.

IV. Psalm 8.

- A.** The words of Psalm 8 pick up Job's point almost exactly, by insisting that God's care for us is not some small-minded nitpicking but simply the way in which providence works.
- B.** This strikes me as a wisdom psalm by virtue of the way in which it tries to reflect the relationship between God and creatures, both in terms of relative importance and in terms of God's astonishingly personal care for us.
- C.** First, I think that it is very important that Job does say what he feels, that he get it off his chest, that he does not pretend as though he weren't feeling that way.
- D.** Second, if this really is a desolation (as I have suggested for the sake of this example), it is important for the person who is suffering to spot the distortion, for in every desolation there is some untruth, and the starting point for ending the desolation is recognizing that untruth as an untruth.
- E.** I do not at all mean to suggest that the effort to uncover the untruth will be easy. But there is no way around the problem. It may take real patience here, and moving too fast doesn't help. Neither does a radical change of course.
- F.** What this particular psalm does is to put the relationship that has disturbed Job into a more truthful light. There is real freedom in our will and in our choices. Since this is simply part of our nature, we need wisdom about how to deal with it.

G. We do well to pray this psalm when we are well, and to pray it when we are ill or in trouble. We can let it give us the words to give praise to God, even when praise for him is the last thing that we feel like doing.

V. Psalm 139 [138] and the prayer of trust.

- A. On the same general theme, it may be useful here to consider Psalm 139 [138], again using the *New King James Version* as our translation.
- B. This psalm too speaks about God's watchful care for us all day and all night long. The psalmist speaks quite frankly about how he would just as soon avoid God's gaze.
- C. As the psalm moves on, it comes to a point like the insight that we examined in Psalm 8, recognition of God's personal care.
- D. Like in some of the wisdom literature that we have been and will be studying, the psalmist acknowledges not understanding the whole picture but begs guidance where he does not sufficiently understand.
- E. The prayer of this psalm is in the spirit that I envision Job as needing to pray, namely, to pray in trust even when he could not see how, or even if, things would work out.

Suggested Reading:

Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*.

Newman, "Lead, Kindly Light."

Thomson, "Hound of Heaven."

Whybray, "The Wisdom Psalms."

Questions to Consider:

1. Is it dishonest to pray when we don't feel like praying, or to pray the words of a psalm that express feelings we do not have at the time?
2. What are the signs to recognize when one is in spiritual desolation and thus in a situation that needs special care, for one's judgments may not be trustworthy?
3. Thomas More composed his own psalm of trust when in the Tower of London awaiting execution. If you were in some terrible predicament, how would you compose yourself for prayer?

Lecture Fifteen

Qoheleth—The Inadequacy of Human Wisdom

Scope: This lecture will treat one of the shorter books within biblical wisdom literature, Qoheleth. In some Bibles this book is entitled Ecclesiastes, and sometimes On the Preacher. From a consideration of the structure of Qoheleth, it will be clear that the book's handling of the search for wisdom in life wanders from topic to topic, occasionally repeating itself with some variation on the famous theme that comes from the book's opening lines: "Vanity of vanities ... All things are vanity!" This lecture will also consider the date of composition of this book, during the exile, in relation to the literary device used at the beginning of the book to identify the author of the book with the legendary sage King Solomon.

Outline

- I. Does prosperity have any better claim to be the meaning of life than suffering?
 - A. Like the litany on time from chapter 3, which we will consider in Lecture Sixteen, the phrase "vanity of vanities" from this book is probably among the best known from the whole Bible. But it is important to pause a moment right here at the start on this term "vanity."
 - B. The Hebrew language has very few abstract terms. It often uses concrete terms metaphorically to express abstract concepts. The translators of Qoheleth have landed on the somewhat abstract word "vanity" as one appropriate way to render this word in the various phrases in which it occurs, such as "vanity of vanities."
 - C. Although the speaker in this book enjoys good health and worldly success, he finds a certain emptiness in some of life's pleasures, and like Job, he finds that experience runs against the expectations of conventional wisdom that virtue (and vice) are duly rewarded (and punished) during this life.

- D. Although spared from having to undergo anything like Job's suffering, the Preacher of the book Qoheleth, who is the speaker throughout the book, also seeks for meaning in life, for he finds the normal run of earthly contentments quite empty and the problem of a future life beyond this life irresolvable.
- E. In this lecture, then, we turn to a third book of biblical wisdom literature, one of the shorter books in the Bible but one whose pithy sayings are often quite profound.
 - 1. For citations to this book and to the following one (Sirach), we will use *The New American Bible*, a translation that may be familiar from its frequent use in Christian liturgies today. This is yet another case where it will much repay anyone to consult more than one Bible translation and see how various translators handle the same material.
 - 2. In this lecture, we will consider the book's composition and structure and examine its opening section. We will then devote the following two lectures to its reflections on such topics as time, death, money, honor, and old age.

II. The book's title.

- A. The Hebrew term in the title of this book, Qoheleth, is not a proper name, but a common noun that is often translated as "preacher."
- B. Although the name "Solomon" does not appear in the text, Qoheleth (the Preacher) is called "David's son" and "king in Jerusalem." Within a few lines, the text rather clearly refers to Solomon when the speaker adverts to a person with an unsurpassed reputation for wisdom at 1:16 and to Solomon's massive wealth in 2:7–9 (see 1 Kings 3:13 and 10:23).

III. The likely date of composition and the question of unity of authorship.

- A. Scholars have argued for various dates for this book, from as early as the 10th century B.C. to as late as the 1st century A.D. But the mainstream view is that the vocabulary, the style, and the content of the book make it extremely unlikely that this book was composed prior to the exile.
- B. The argumentation on this point is fairly technical and involves such things as the use of some Persian loanwords (presumably acquired during the exile) that do not occur in biblical Hebrew until after the exile but that do appear here, and also the reflection on money in chapter 5.

- C. By the same literary device that is common among the Bible's wisdom books, the unknown author of this book presents his efforts under the patronage of Israel's greatest sage.
- D. Admittedly, the book wanders from topic to topic. In the scholarship on this book, there have been persistent questions about unity of authorship and the suggestion of two or more authors.
- E. Connected to this is a worry that dates back to antiquity about the presence (or at least the appearance) of contradictions within the book. (We will consider the details later on.)
- F. My own suspicion, however, is that the answer to the problems that have been raised about the inner coherence of this book should not be directed to a search for different authors so much as to an appreciation of the perplexities that author faced in trying to answer such profound questions.

IV. The book's structure and content.

- A. This book does not have a plot or a narrative. It is not a set of conversations, as we saw in Job, nor a collection of sayings, as in Proverbs. It is rather a set of musings by the speaker (the Preacher) that return again and again to the theme of the emptiness of life.
- B. The book is written in prose and sprinkled with quotations of proverbs and maxims. We will find here something like entries in a personal notebook, in a search for wisdom that can become ours too if we use these thoughts for prayer and meditation as their author must have done.

V. The preface and the author's initial reflections on the search for wisdom (1:1–2:26).

- A. There is nothing new under the sun. In one sense, the opening gambit could be taken to deny the reality of new and distinctive events in the course of history.
- B. By the literary convention in which the Preacher (Qoheleth) employs the persona of King Solomon, we hear a "historical fact" in the context of a musing on the way in which "historical" events and their significance are quickly forgotten.

- C. The best that one can do is to try to achieve wisdom through reflection on experience (as suggested by the proverb at line 18), even though there will be some problems that resist any attempt at analysis.
 - D. Qoheleth then lists the “follies” that he tried. Enjoyable as each of these proves for a time, they quickly pale into insignificance.
 - E. In recognizing that God brings joy, and not just sorrow, the author offers his reason for urging us to appreciate joyful things when they come.
- VI.** There is a painting by Van Gogh that may have some relation to this precise point.
- A. One does not normally think of Van Gogh in connection with the Bible, yet he has a painting entitled *Still Life with Open Bible*.
 - B. In fact, Van Gogh felt a calling to pursue the ministry and was a seminary student for three years. He served as a missionary to Belgian coal miners, with so much zeal for the poor that some of his fellow ministers reported him to the authorities of the Dutch Reformed Church.
- VII.** There is something quite haunting, to be sure, about the frequent judgments throughout this book that this thing or that thing is vanity. I suggest that we keep this range of questions in mind as one of our ongoing concerns when reading the rest of this sapiential text.

Suggested Reading:

Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*.
 Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*.
 Long, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*.
The New American Bible, Ecclesiastes.

Questions to Consider:

1. Qoheleth evaluates various options for satisfaction in life and finds them incomplete. What is your personal evaluation of the items that might be on his mind today? New houses? A fantastic wine collection? The latest home entertainment system?

2. Even study and the pursuit of wisdom get the same verdict in these chapters, and yet Qoheleth continues to think about this problem and to write out his reflections. Do you take the author to be suffering from a mood that will pass, or perhaps trying to put the life of study and wisdom-searching into some larger perspective?
3. What is your understanding of the final comments in chapter 2 about treating food, drink, work, and whatever wisdom we can achieve as gifts from God, to be enjoyed without worrying about who will inherit them?

Lecture Sixteen

Qoheleth—Skepticism about Easy Answers

Scope: The problem that Qoheleth faces is like that of Job: Do the virtues and vices of a person get their due rewards in this life? Like much of the book of Job, this book tends to answer in the negative. Experience with life, the text suggests, warrants a somewhat skeptical thesis: Life is no more than a meaningless series of unrelated events. This lecture will focus on a number of candidates for the meaning of life that are set forth in the book: knowledge, pleasure, power, wealth, love, and life itself. We will then trace the evidence presented for rejecting each of these possibilities and the author's caution against accepting any easy answers.

Outline

- I. What does reflection on experience have to teach us?
 - A. At the end of the last lecture, we noticed Qoheleth reflecting on the ways in which God's ordering of events brings joys as well as sorrows.
 - B. The third chapter begins with a litany of times and seasons. Among other things, this is a passage useful for reflection when we find the pace of life too hectic, a reminder to slow down.
 - C. So far as I can see, there is no particular pattern one can find in this list, and that may well be the point: Order in the world is elusive. But even though the order is elusive, there is no sense that things need to be out of control, that one needs to be a fatalist or resigned to things.
 - D. In fact, I doubt that the list is entirely about the times in which human beings choose to act. I suspect that it is also about the other events that we will meet in this life, ready or not. While we cannot control everything, what we can make decisions about is how we will meet and deal with situations.
 - E. In the verses that immediately follow, Qoheleth observes that it is God who has determined the way the world works and has arranged things that we need to do: Even when we cannot comprehend the grand order of things, our task is to do well with whatever we encounter.

- F.** Throughout this book, Qoheleth urges that we accept what comes in life, whether we have had the chance to prepare or not. But his advice on what to do about it is not a stoic cultivation of emotionlessness, nor is it the hedonistic suggestion that we go through life looking for joy everywhere.
- II.** In the remainder of the third chapter, Qoheleth sounds a companion theme, the inevitability of death and the assurance that God will judge.
- A.** I stress this point especially in light of the question that we have seen raised in Proverbs, which expected earthly recompense for virtue and vice, and in Job, which confronted the problem of innocent suffering and unpunished wickedness.
- B.** The position that will be taken by a later book like the Wisdom of Solomon as well as by the Gospels is that there is indeed a life after death, and that we can expect the complete rectification of wrongs and the reward of fidelity by God's judgment.
- C.** The book of Qoheleth does not offer a clear answer about the question of whether there is an afterlife. In the extension of the comparison it makes between human beings and beasts, what we hear is Qoheleth's unresolved perplexity on this subject.
- III.** As often in Qoheleth, the line about being made from the dust is an allusion to the story of Creation told in Genesis. It may prove helpful to reflect a bit here on certain possibilities that are suggested by the Hebrew terms used here.
- A.** Genesis records that "the LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7, *New American Bible*). Not only does that text play on the generic Hebrew word for "man" (*adam*) and the word for "ground" (*adama*), but it includes the word for "life-breath" (*ruah*), which comes to be translated into the Greek text of the Septuagint as *psyche*, or "soul."
- B.** It seems to me, then, that this passage, in a way that we might not quite realize, given terms like "vanity" and "life-breath," is calling the "life-breath" of the human soul a mere "breath"—something fleeting and insubstantial. Since the human being will die like any animal, perhaps that is the end of us too.

- C. But, mindful that God breathed into the dust of the earth to bring about the life of the human spirit, Qoheleth speculates here about whether there may be a different fate awaiting us, a going upward rather than downward.

IV. The ethics of Qoheleth.

- A. Earlier in the book, Qoheleth had insisted that the cultivation of wisdom might well be fruitless, but in the fourth chapter he offers a list of sayings in the form of “X is better than Y.” I take this to suggest that there are at least some guiding principles that one can learn so as to cope with life a little better.
- B. The fifth and sixth chapters offer advice on how to conduct oneself in certain kinds of situations.
- C. Like the book of Proverbs, this is a collection of maxims. No one of them settles the grand questions about the meaning of life, but there is much reliable advice about making good choices.
- D. As you will remember from the previous lecture, it was the prominence of the discussion of money that gives some clue to the dating of this book as coming from the period during or after the exile.
- E. In contrast with the vanity of the person “who toils for wind” (5:15), Qoheleth portrays the life of moderation as good and sensible.
- F. The sixth chapter considers the lot of those who lack nothing of what they desire but cannot enjoy those things. Note too that there is no sense of the fear of death, for it is regarded as quite natural and inevitable.

- V. In the next lecture, we will turn to the second half of Qoheleth, beginning at 6:10.

Suggested Reading:

Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*.

Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*.

Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, chap. 1.

Seow, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes*.

Questions to Consider:

1. One of the main questions raised by Qoheleth is that of time. When things are too hectic and hurried, what do you do to slow things down and find time to reflect? When things are agonizingly slow, what do you recommend to use wisely the time you must pass?
2. Qoheleth addresses questions of conduct during times of relative prosperity. Do you have the habit of making any regular review of conscience during your prosperous times? What form do your considerations take? Are the 10 Commandments a helpful way to make this review? What suggestions do you have for enhancing the honesty and acuity of your reflections?
3. When a book like Qoheleth alludes to the topic of death, it begins to address the natural human fear of death. Many a religious author has urged that one of the greatest benefits of faith is conquest of this fear. What is there to fear about death? Should one fear it? Why?

Lecture Seventeen

Qoheleth—Keeping Faith during Confusion

Scope: While the book of Job poses questions about the meaning of life and faith specifically from the midst of actual suffering, Qoheleth asks them from a viewpoint of uncertainty about the future: Even if there is health and prosperity now, how long will they last? In this lecture we will consider his sense of the limits of human understanding together with his sense of the need to live and make choices despite the uncertainties. There is also discussion toward the end of the book about the inevitability of growing old and having to face the prospect of death. This lecture will consider the book's reflections on the impossibility of foreseeing the future and the wisdom of having faith in God. Mindful of the scholarly controversy about whether the book has a coherent perspective or is the result of plural authors, I will argue instead that what the book presents is the movement back and forth within the mind of a person of faith who is confronted by mysteries beyond his comprehension.

Outline

- I. A testimony about the limits of human understanding.
 - A. After several chapters of detailed advice, the final verses of chapter 6 return to the level of generality with which Qoheleth began and thus seem to mark the start of the second half of the book.
 - B. Reinforcing the general thrust of the book, Qoheleth begins the next section by urging us to understand even the sayings that he has just offered from the perspective that all is vanity. There is also a profound reverence for the Creator and a deep sense that there is more to God than we can ever know.
 - C. In between this set of warnings about what we cannot know and thus what we dare not presume is some interesting spiritual direction. Some of it recommends sobriety of spirit, in the fashion of the “better than ...” type of sayings we studied before.

- D. We should always, Qoheleth tells us, keep God in the picture. This is, once again, good spiritual direction, both about what to do when we are in the presence of consolation and what to remember when we are experiencing desolation.

II. There is an interesting sense here of the contingencies of life.

However much practical wisdom we may amass, we are unlikely to be able to ward off disaster. The best we can do is to fear the LORD and avoid folly.

- A. In a sense, Qoheleth seems to be practicing a very deliberate form of pessimism: Assume the worst—then whatever happens can't be worse and might actually surprise you by being better.
- B. With an earnestness similar to that we found in Proverbs, Qoheleth too has remarks on the difference between love and lust and on the need to have a certain reserve about judging what others say, as well as some advice about not taking oneself too seriously.
- C. What is most necessary, he apparently feels, is a certain skepticism about human motives.
- D. In light of the change that began with the covenant made with Noah—namely, that one cannot count on some immediate divine correction of the various injustices that powerful people are sure to commit when imposing their will on others—the best thing is to cultivate an attitude of reserve.
- E. We might think of some of the great saints who were known for cultivating mirth themselves. This was a trait, for instance, that made Thomas More very loveable as well as part of what gave him the equanimity to persevere in his sufferings.

III. Some practical advice.

- A. Despite the very bleak portrait of reality and the likelihood of unavoidable chaos and calamity, there is still reason for hope.
- B. Just as in the first half of this book, there is a fierce concentration on both the limitations of our ability to understand everything and the impossibility for us to control many things.
- C. But, Qoheleth cautions, hope should not turn into presumption, for there is no way to guarantee the success of our careful projects, and a single foolish deed can upset what we have carefully planned.

- D. The next set of maxims in the book includes some shrewd advice for sizing up those risks that are an inescapable condition of life.
- E. In another of the most famous and often-quoted lines from this book, Qoheleth urges us to practice the virtue of liberality and generosity in times of special uncertainty.
- F. There is a brief exhortation to the young to enjoy the energy of youth while it lasts. Qoheleth then turns to the problems of age and urges us, from our youth on, to make a virtue with regard to something the aged often do a lot—remembering!

IV. What are we to make of this intriguing book?

- A. For some, its dark perspective is predominant. Even its constant invocation of a divine perspective can seem so fatalistic, as if its central message were simply: Find a good attitude to accept whatever comes—it will be less painful than fighting all the way.
- B. Fatalism in one's outlook can easily be joined with a denial of freedom of the will—if not at the theoretical level in the way that modern determinism does, then at least at the practical level: There is no freedom to speak of, except perhaps in one's attitude.
- C. A crucial part of the religion of Judaism, and of Christianity as it emerged, is the reality of freedom and a profound sense of the responsibility that comes from whatever free and deliberate choices we make in our lives.
- D. Some interpreters have seen in this book not so much a religious perspective but only a philosophical one, and specifically the philosophy of cultivating a Stoic indifference to whatever one cannot control—and that means most of life.
- E. One of the important points to recall here is the question of inspiration. For those who hold, as I do, that the whole of the Bible is inspired, it is no surprise to find certain deeper levels of unity even amid the differences that come from the various human authors.

- V. I think that we need to differentiate between the Stoic form of indifference, which is suspicious of the emotions and has no sense of the goodness of divine providence, and the perspective of Qoheleth.
- A. There is an interesting distinction that philosophers make between “truth” and “certitude” that may apply here. “Truth” refers to whether what we say does or does not correspond to the way things are. “Certitude” refers to how sure we are about it.
 - B. What gives Qoheleth far greater certainty is his trust in God, the ultimate in trustworthy sources. But in areas where he has no revelation or inspiration—such as what is going to happen tomorrow, or how things will work out, or what heirs will do with what they inherit—he has little certainty.
 - C. The continuities in theological outlook with Genesis, Proverbs, and Job are all considerable, and so I would emphasize seeing this book as profoundly connected to the sapiential tradition, but admittedly with its own points of emphasis.
- VI. Maybe you know the wonderful film directed by Gabriel Axel, *Babette’s Feast*. The reference to Qoheleth is, admittedly, but one scene, but the film is in the spirit of Ecclesiastes, if ever a film could be. I hope you get to see it.

Suggested Reading:

Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*.

Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*.

Suggested Viewing:

Axel, *Babette’s Feast*.

Questions to Consider:

1. All considered, what does the saying “All is vanity” mean? Does it deny that there is any meaning to be found in life? Or do you take it to mean simply that there are some things that we will never adequately understand?
2. Qoheleth makes some suggestions about old age. Whether you are young or old, put yourself in the perspective of someone who has become infirm because of age but still has good mental abilities. What would you most want from your relatives and friends? What could you most give to them?

Lecture Eighteen

Interlude—Wisdom Psalms for Uncertainty

Scope: As a way to reflect on the rather dark answer that the book of Qoheleth gives to the question about the possibility of attaining wisdom, this lecture will turn once more to the Psalter. Its vast range of materials includes psalms that may be especially useful for prayer in times of confusion and uncertainty. We will consider some methods for praying the Psalms as well as their content. Earlier in this series of lectures, we considered some materials from the book of Proverbs that were relatively optimistic in correlating faith and reason. This lecture will give us occasion to reflect on the topic of prayer and faith when reason seems to have lost its way or to be blocked from faith by its own uncertainties.

Outline

- I.** The Psalms: a versatile prayer book.
 - A.** Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions envision ways of using the Psalter for public liturgical recitation and for private prayer. It may prove interesting for nonbelievers as well as believers to become more acquainted with how the Psalter works.
 - B.** In Judaism, it has been customary for authorized prayer books to be organized for the recitation of the entire Psalter weekly, with elaborate provision for cantillation. In addition, many psalms are associated in special ways with feast days and holy days throughout the year.
 - C.** In Christianity, the Psalter provides texts for prayer in various ways. The Psalms have been the basis for many hymns, and the texts of the Psalms themselves are often sung or recited after the reading of other parts of the scriptures.
- II.** Meditation.
 - A.** There are also many styles in use for personal meditation on the Psalms. By “meditation,” what I mean here is a form of mental prayer that involves some active thinking about the meaning of the text and some personal response.
 - B.** For this way of praying, there are a number of preliminary steps.

- C. This method of prayer also calls for a number of steps during the prayer period. For those who are seeking and inquiring, this approach to prayer through meditation may be a good way to begin.
 - 1. Try to begin the period by making some effort to consecrate the time you are about to spend.
 - 2. In my own tradition, the next steps are to call to mind with one's imagination, for a moment, the setting of whatever one is about to meditate on, and then to ask God in one's own words for the grace that one seeks.
 - 3. To "ask for the grace" means to request from God what it is that your heart desires.
- D. After these preliminaries, one then turns to the passage chosen for prayer.
- E. The point of all this method, let me repeat, is simply to be helpful. It takes a while to get into the habit, and the steps can be adjusted for what you personally find helpful.

III. Meditating on Psalm 49 [48].

- A. Since we have been considering with Job and Qoheleth questions about innocent suffering and the meaning of life, one of the wisdom psalms that come to mind is Psalm 49 [48]. For our purposes here I will, as before, use the translation from the Grail Psalter (*The Psalms: A New Translation*).
- B. After two stanzas in which the psalmist, like a musical Qoheleth, asks for the attention of all the peoples of the world, he takes up his harp to sing of "wisdom" about the problem that is bothering him (verses 2–5). I will be using the *New King James Version* as our translation here.
- C. For the next three stanzas (verses 6–12), plus a short refrain (verse 13), the psalmist, much in the spirit of Qoheleth, reflects on the way in which his faith gives him confidence to get through the perils of life
- D. To focus on these lines is not to be morose or fatalistic. They may give a way to gain perspective on things when our lives get out of perspective. In a meditative prayer, one does very well to ask oneself what these lines mean, who is saying them, and how they might apply to one if they apply.

- E. The psalm then has four stanzas (verses 14–20), followed by the same refrain as before (verse 21). In this part of the psalm, what I see is the psalmist getting something of an answer from God to the problem that he posed in verse 6, the answer that Qoheleth ponders but cannot himself reach.
 - F. After considering the injustices that may permit the wicked to prosper and the innocent to suffer (verse 14), the psalmist expects that God will restore justice (verses 15–16).
 - G. My suggestion is that you consider meditating upon the Psalms, whether in this way or in some way that seems good to you.
 - H. Don't worry if you find yourself distracted from time to time. Simply call your attention to it and then turn back to what you meant to do. That was the point of having the image at the beginning, to help you with that, if indeed it proves to be of help.
- IV. We will turn our attention in the next lecture to the study of another wisdom book, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus).

Suggested Reading:

Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 279–90.

Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*.

Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*.

Simpson, *Jewish Prayer and Worship*.

Questions to Consider:

1. It may be helpful here to be quite practical about your needs for prayer. Where can you find a quiet place for meditation? And, realistically, when might you set aside some time for prayer? Early in the morning? In the quiet of the evening? When?
2. Various spiritual writers have suggested that one reflect for a few moments after finishing a period of prayer about what happened during the prayer time. What sort of things do you think a person should look at during this reflection on a prayer period?
3. What have been your own experiences of meditative prayer? What tends to work well, and what not so well? With due recognition that the fruits of a prayer must really come from God and not from our own manufacture, what in particular can we do to help provide suitable conditions for praying, for staying focused, and for getting to prayer regularly?

Lecture Nineteen

Sirach—A Traditional Approach to Wisdom

Scope: Sirach, also known as Ben-Sirach and in some Bibles as Ecclesiasticus, is the longest of the Bible's sapiential books. Its perspective and style clearly resemble that of the book of Proverbs, but with this difference: In a number of places, it portrays suffering as a way of testing character and a way of teaching moral lessons. This lecture will consider the structural elements of this book: a preface by the grandson of the author; two lengthy collections of sayings and maxims on diverse topics; in the middle, a wisdom poem; and at the end, some material on God's providential role in the history of Israel. This lecture will also take up the question of this book's status within the biblical canon and the historical context of its composition, presumably in the 2nd century B.C.

Outline

- I. Introduction to Sirach.
 - A. Anyone who picks up the book of Sirach will be reminded of the book of Proverbs. For reasons that we will consider momentarily, it is found in some Bibles under the title Ecclesiasticus and in others as Ben-Sirach.
 - B. Like Proverbs, it offers us carefully crafted proverbs on many important subjects. Its tone is reverential. Its deepest concern is to pass on Israel's traditional wisdom about the need to frame one's life and conduct by a holy fear of the LORD and obedience to divine law.
 - C. Not only has the author tried to show the relevance of this traditional wisdom for his own day, but he has also subtly provided an answer to the objections raised by books like Job and to the optimism of the worldview that is provided by Proverbs in light of the problem of innocent suffering and unpunished wickedness.

II. The structure of this book.

- A.** The internal structure of the two collections of proverbs will be examined when we come to that material. What we want to notice here is the big picture: Another one of the special wisdom poems (like those we saw in Proverbs and Job) stands near the very center of the book.
- B.** While Qoheleth is inclined toward an almost timeless philosophical perspective, Sirach is deeply alert to the question of time. Like some of the “historical” books of the Bible (Judges, Kings, Chronicles, and so on), Sirach recounts part of Israel’s history, but now from a wisdom perspective.
- C.** In setting up this course, I have included as interludes between major sections of the course a few lectures devoted to the topic of praying with the Psalms. Here at the end of Sirach is my inspiration for making that my practice in this lecture series: the psalm and the hymn with which this book ends.

III. The title and the author.

- A.** According to 50:27, the name of the author of this book is “Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach.” It is customary to refer to the author as “Ben-Sirach” (“son of Sirach”) and to the title of the book as “Sirach.” From some self-referential remarks in the text, we know him as a learned teacher in an academy at Jerusalem who spent his life reflecting on the implications of faith for his culture.
- B.** Occasionally one will find this book listed under the title of Ben-Sirach, or Wisdom of the Son of Sirach. It is more common to find it entitled Ecclesiasticus (taken from its designation in the Latin Vulgate, using a Latinized version of the Greek name of the book) because of the extensive usage that Christianity made of it for instructing the faithful, and especially catechumens, on moral matters.
- C.** I would like to respect and honor that tradition, but to prevent confusion between Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus, I have chosen to refer to those books in this lecture series as Qoheleth and Sirach, respectively.
- D.** We will continue to make use of the translation provided by *The New American Bible* for this portion of the course.

IV. The date and setting of this book's composition.

- A.** Sirach was composed in Hebrew between 200 and 175 B.C., and the author's grandson translated the book into Greek at some point after 132 B.C.
- B.** Especially relevant to the period two generations before that is the Roman defeat of the Seleucid forces of Antiochus III in 189 B.C. The Seleucid Empire, in short, was the regime established by Seleucus at Babylon after the death of Alexander the Great and the partition of his empire. The Roman victory seems to have relaxed the pressure that the Jews had felt from their Seleucid rulers.
- C.** The Hellenization promoted by Seleucid rule for purposes of unifying their territory constituted a crisis for Judaism, both in Judea and for the large numbers of Jews living in Alexandria.
- D.** What we find in Sirach (in the body of the text, and not just in the Greek translation made by the grandson) is quite interesting. It is not an attack on Greek culture, nor a call to return to only Jewish traditions, but a kind of handbook for the practical needs of living one's faith in an alien culture.
- E.** Because the book shows no sign of the new terrors devised by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, there is good reason to think that it must have been written before 175 B.C. The dates for Simon II, the high priest mentioned as the author's contemporary in chapter 50, are 219–196 B.C., and so the book was presumably written between 200 and 175 B.C.

V. The place of this book within the Bible is, admittedly, complex.

- A.** Although this book is quoted in the Talmud, it is not a part of the traditional Jewish canon, nor is it canonical for most Protestant traditions, because no Hebrew text was known for it at the time that those canons were being settled. It is regarded as divinely inspired and thus canonical for both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.
- B.** Where some modern editions translate this book from the Greek text and content themselves with occasional footnotes to the Hebrew, *The New American Bible*, which we are using here, relies on a critical text constructed from all the available ancient and medieval manuscripts.

VI. The opening segments of this book.

- A.** The author's grandson refers no fewer than three times in his brief foreword to the tripartite division of the Bible that I mentioned at the start of this lecture series.
- B.** Given the attention that will be paid throughout this book to the challenges presented by Hellenistic culture, including the traditions of Greek philosophy, the opening lines of the book are particularly significant.
- C.** The author of Sirach then treats at length one of the central themes of biblical wisdom literature, the fear of the LORD.
- D.** After a number of verses in this vein, our attention is turned to some of its practical implications, and in the next passage we see one of the important themes of this book: Living according to the Decalogue will prepare one for the gift of wisdom.
- E.** The whole of the second chapter continues with this exhortatory approach, including a contrast between blessings and warnings that may well be a model for one of the records of the Beatitudes.

VII. With these indications in mind, we will be ready in the next lecture to consider the first collection of proverbs that Sirach provides.

Suggested Reading:

Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*, 21–131.

Dell, “*Get Wisdom, Get Insight*,” chap. 8.

Skehan and DiLella, *The Anchor Bible: The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.** Why does Sirach see a confluence of reason and revelation? How might this perspective help in conversations about bringing religious views into the public arena?
- 2.** What does “fear of the LORD” mean? How does Sirach use this phrase?
- 3.** As you proceed to read through Sirach, there will be a great many proverbs and maxims. How does Sirach's use of such sayings compare with that of Proverbs?

Lecture Twenty

Sirach on the Cultivation of Virtue

Scope: The book of Sirach recommends a highly traditional approach to wisdom. Sirach sees wisdom as coming from God and recommends the venerable maxim that fear of the LORD is the beginning of all wisdom. While sharing with Job and Qoheleth a sense of the need for humility and faith before the uncertainties of the future and the mystery of suffering, Sirach takes up the exhortatory tone of Proverbs in recommending the cultivation of virtue. This lecture will examine a variety of passages from the book's two collections of proverbs on such topics as fidelity to Torah, friendship, fear of the LORD, sin, and vice, with attention to both style and substance.

Outline

- I. The two collections of proverbs (3:1–23:37 and 25:1–42:14).
 - A. The two largest units within the book of Sirach are the proverb collections in 3:1–23:37 and 25:1–42:14. This lecture will deal primarily with these two collections and will reserve the wisdom poem of chapter 24 that separates them for the following lecture.
 - B. As in the book of Proverbs, the maxims gathered here are sayings, pithy but profound, and meant to be easily memorable (especially in a largely oral culture) for rhetorical effectiveness in explaining oneself and in making an argument.
 - C. The maxims of each section do not tend to form a sustained argument flowing from premises to conclusion in the way we might expect of a book chapter or an oral lecture.
- II. The arrangement of content in these two collections has the feel of an anthology or an encyclopedia. There is no discernible order in the way in which various topics come up, but there is great richness within each area.
 - A. Many of these groupings concern particular virtues and duties.

- B.** There are periodic reflections on wisdom: 4:12–19; 14:20–15:10; 16:22–18:14; 37:16–26. We will study them in the following lecture. (Note also the passages on wisdom outside the collections, e.g., 1:1–10 and 51:13–30).
- C.** Since there is no story line to follow here, the better path may be simply to immerse ourselves in some representative samples and leave others for your own reading.

III. Learning from Sirach's proverbs.

- A.** The importance of Torah observance, and in particular a fidelity to the commandments, is very much on the author's mind. The opening segment of the first collection, for instance, is a meditation on the commandment about honoring fathers and mothers.
- B.** The sections on friendships are likewise full of wisdom. Consider, for instance, the passage on whom to choose as a friend—it is one that I have often used with young people who can easily be swept off their feet over the first person who shows them affection.
- C.** Given the frequency with which we have found the phrase “fear of the LORD” already in this book, this might be a suitable time to reflect a bit further on the topic as a theme typical of biblical wisdom literature.
- D.** Related to the topic of fear of the LORD are Sirach's reflections on vice and sin. Interestingly, these passages do not tend to emphasize divine retribution so much as ridiculous folly.

IV. The problem of suffering.

- A.** The book of Sirach is more like the book of Proverbs than like Job or Qoheleth in that it does not present an effort at theodicy but focuses on showing wisdom about conduct as the way to a good life on this earth.
- B.** If one were to emphasize passages like these, the conclusion would presumably be that one should accustom oneself to physical death as the end of one's existence. There are, however, some hints of a kind of judgment at death that make possible another interpretation of this book as yet one more stage in the progressive disclosure of revelation about an afterlife.

- C. A minimalist reading would interpret these verses in terms of consistency in one's conduct and the preservation of one's reputation for kindness until the end. But within later Jewish tradition as well as subsequent Christian tradition, these verses can well be understood to imply a judgment after death and the efficacy of prayer for the dead.
 - D. It would be going beyond the evidence to say that the book of Sirach already holds the view that we find in 2 Maccabees, but one way in which to understand these texts is to see an inner logic to the position of Sirach that will be made explicit later on.
 - E. Within the text of Sirach, however, the predominant perspective is mortality.
- V. We will continue our study of Sirach in the next lecture by considering its wisdom poetry.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, chap. 6.

Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, chap. 5.

Questions to Consider:

1. What has this new material added to your understanding of the phrase "fear of the LORD"? How should it be interpreted here?
2. Like Sirach, Greek philosophy also distinguishes among types of friendship. Aristotle, for instance, differentiates between the friendships among the virtuous, the friendliness among those who work together, and the amity experienced by those who like to do things together. How do you distinguish among different types of friendly relationships?
3. How do you see Sirach's exhortations about being steadfast and virtuous until death? Is this an ethics of "nobility throughout life," or is this a viewpoint that will find its completion in the belief in an afterlife with God?

Lecture Twenty-One

Sirach's Wisdom Poetry

Scope: At the middle of the book of Sirach, we find a wisdom poem that is distinctive among other such wisdom poems for its explicit connection between wisdom and the observance of Torah. This lecture will examine the structure and content of this wisdom poem and compare it with other instances of this genre in Proverbs, Job, and the prophet Baruch. This lecture will also consider the set of hymns and prayers for wisdom that occur in its two collections of proverbs.

Outline

- I. The presence of a wisdom poem in Sirach.
 - A. Because so much of Sirach seems directed to presenting a new and updated form of instruction in the style of the book of Proverbs, a form of education especially suited for the author's own time, it is no surprise to find here a wisdom poem like the one found in Proverbs.
 - B. The thrust of the poem can be expressed in this way: Wisdom dwells with God, beyond human reach. But the LORD who created Wisdom has bestowed this Wisdom upon all creation—and especially on those who love him. God has made Wisdom accessible for human beings in his gift of the covenant, and Israel should take delight in this gift.
 - C. The poem appears in chapter 24, between the two collections of proverbs. It differs from them significantly in style.
- II. The poem.
 - A. Wisdom is once again personified, as in Proverbs, and is here presented as the very first of God's creatures—as quite beyond the reach of any human praise.
 - B. The poem begins by identifying Wisdom as God's first creation and noting her governance over all the earth.
 - C. Like a primeval mist that hovers over the whole of creation, Wisdom reigns over all the natures. But Wisdom has come to have a unique presence to Israel—dwelling as a pillar of cloud to overshadow the people as they sojourn in the desert.

- D.** What follows is a highly mystical image of the tree of life (an image from Genesis that is echoed in Psalms (e.g., Psalm 1) and here described in terms of various substances that are associated with temple worship.
- E.** Just in case there was any doubt, the author of the poem then makes clear that this is not a wisdom of human devising, not some form of human philosophy, but rather the gift of Torah and the covenant.
- F.** Speaking again in his own voice, the author explains how he has tasted of this wisdom and has invited others to share in it by offering them instruction.
- G.** After the completion of the wisdom poem with these lines, the author then continues in his own voice and begins the second collection of proverbs.

III. Comparison with other wisdom poems.

- A.** As in Proverbs 8 and Job 28 (we might also mention Baruch 3:9–4:4), Wisdom is represented as a person, the first of all creatures, with God at the world's beginning, but somehow distinct from him.
- B.** What philosophers from many traditions have identified as the duties that flow from the natural moral law, discoverable by reason reflecting on human nature, include items that are the central parts of the Decalogue.
- C.** It may also be interesting to note here that the Christian tradition identifies perfect wisdom with Christ. This tradition has seen here in the wisdom poem of Sirach, a kind of oblique anticipation of the doctrine of the divine word, the Son of God who became incarnate as Jesus Christ.

IV. Hymns and prayers for wisdom.

- A.** Other passages in Sirach also refer to wisdom.
- B.** Early in the second collection, just after groups of proverbs about honoring parents, guarding against pride, and being ready to offer charity to the poor, the author testifies to how much Wisdom will bless those who submit to her discipline and observe her teachings.

- C. Halfway through the first collection, the author provides a hymn to the happiness that comes from wisdom (14:20–15:10) that has many parallels with Psalm 119 [118], which is about the happiness that comes from meditating on the law.
- D. Its final portion also brings to bear the opposition between the two ways, the ways of life and death, that we saw figure so prominently in Proverbs, and the interiorization of the commandments that we noted in a previous lecture.
- E. In the beautiful meditation on God's creation of mankind (16:22–18:14), the author explains the way in which wisdom imbues everything that God has made, and human beings in a special way.
- F. In the style that we have seen to be characteristic of Sirach, the author then explains the universality of God's dominion, but the special gift made to Israel in the covenant and the law and hence the special responsibilities that come for keeping the commandments (see 17:10–19).
- G. Toward the end of the second collection, there is yet one more wisdom passage, this time with a strong message about the need to discipline one's desires and cultivate moral virtue.
- H. The practical nature of the wisdom here is extremely important, as is the instruction about the need to think before we speak and to moderate our appetites. We could once again raise the question about whether this is something of a comment or a corrective for Qoheleth, which had counseled a vigorous enjoyment of life.
- V. It may well be that the author of Sirach is sharing with us his personal experience here. We will watch for it again as we turn in the next lecture to the final portion of the book and to something quite new and distinctive in the tradition of biblical wisdom literature, the use of biographical sketches.

Suggested Reading:

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 527–41.

Skehan and DiLella, *The Anchor Bible: The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 240–62.

Questions to Consider:

1. From the images presented in the wisdom poem of Sirach 24, what is your vision of Wisdom here? Why do you suppose Wisdom is presented in these images?
2. The book frequently speaks of the discipline needed for attaining and preserving wisdom. What would you regard as the practices most needed for gaining and keeping wisdom? What gets in the way of finding or keeping it?
3. Why does the author of Sirach connect wisdom so strongly with happiness and with the law? What might you say to one who finds morality or the law heavy or burdensome?

Lecture Twenty-Two

Sirach on Divine Providence within History

Scope: The final portion of the book of Sirach contemplates the proactive role that divine providence has played within history. This lecture will consider the lovely hymn praising the glory of God in nature and the lengthy meditation on the history of salvation in which the book of Sirach recounts the stories of many of the great figures in the Bible, from Enoch, Noah, and Abraham through Ben-Sirach's own day. Our analysis of this material will let us reflect on the importance of memory and gratitude, and will include (as we have often done in the interludes) a suggestion about prayer in this mode by considering the psalm of thanksgiving with which the book concludes.

Outline

- I.** Divine wisdom in nature and in history (42:15–50:24).
 - A.** Directly after the second of the two collections of proverbs in Sirach comes a pair of sections on the evidence for the presence of divine wisdom in the world: first a section on the presence of God in nature and then a longer segment on God's manifestations in history, followed by a hymn of thanksgiving.
 - B.** This pairing of nature and history as the spheres of concern here indicates the author's sense of the universality of divine wisdom. Its activity is manifest in the orderliness of the cosmos and, in a different way, in the contingencies of the human world.
- II.** Sirach's treatment of divine providence in the cosmos (42:15–43:35).
 - A.** The section presenting the evidence of divine wisdom in nature is shorter than the one given to the catalogue of Israel's patriarchs—but not, I think, because it is in any way less important.
 - B.** One of the interesting aspects of the two-tiered approach to wisdom among the Greeks is the tendency to reduce the notion of God to an impersonal principle.

- C. By contrast, Judaism proved resilient in retaining a notion of God as utterly transcendent even while deeply concerned about the salvation of the world through the chosen people, even when operating in a milieu permeated by Greek thought, like that faced by the author of Sirach.
- D. The picture painted in this section is utterly confident about divine power over nature, but the entire section remains at the level of commonsense observations, without the abstractions typical of Greek analysis.
- E. The sweeping characterization of God's understanding as penetrating even the future will, of course, present theoretical difficulties to many subsequent generations of religious philosophers.
- F. Our author treats, in turn, the sun, the moon, the stars, the rainbow, thunder and lightning, frost and snow, and various other wonders of nature.

III. Sirach's treatment of divine providence in history (44:1–50:24).

- A. These seven chapters are dedicated to showing the plan of God that is disclosed in the lives of the patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets of Israel as paradigms of practical wisdom. The preface to this section indicates the author's consistent perspective throughout, namely, that it is God who has been at work for and in his people.
- B. What we can see already in the early members of this list is a testimony to human cooperation with divine providence and the rewards that God gives for that obedience.
- C. The catalog unfolds through Isaac and Jacob and then has long sections on Moses and his brother Aaron, with an emphasis once again on the virtues of these individuals and the power of God acting through them.
- D. The list moves on through Samuel, who guided Israel even from the grave; the prophet Nathan and King David, who repented when Nathan rebuked him for his sins; King Solomon, from whom God did not withdraw his mercy or cause his promises to fail even when Solomon fell into grievous sins.
- E. The tone rightly changes with the mention of the sinful sons of Solomon: Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

- F. The contrast between them and the zealous prophet Elijah, who comes next, could not be greater. We hear of the fearless Elisha and the steadfast Hezekiah; the reformer Josiah; and various prophets, all of them contrasted with the series of wicked kings whom God put at the mercy of foreign nations in punishment.
- G. In conclusion, the author (Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach) sounds his traditional note, and it reads like one of the psalms.

IV. The hymn of thanksgiving (51:1–30).

- A. As we have been noting in our interludes on the psalms, there are various ways of praying that are especially associated with the Bible's sapiential literature. Here at the end of the book we have a hymn of thanksgiving in gratitude to God for sparing the author from dangers and evils of all kinds.
- B. The author describes at length his being on the point of death and then being saved after remembering the LORD's mercies and calling upon God's name. The Hebrew texts of this book that have only been recovered in modern times add something at this point that is not in the Greek text, namely, the same litany of praise that is found in Psalm 136 [135].

V. A wisdom canticle.

- A. The final portion of the chapter is a poem about the quest for wisdom that has an acrostic structure. That is, the first letter of each verse is the next successive letter of the alphabet.
- B. In a sense, this poem at the end of the book corresponds to the prayer for wisdom at the beginning and the long wisdom poem in the center. The author now promises to teach without cost the wisdom he has freely received to anyone who will submit to wisdom's discipline.

Suggested Reading:

DiLella, "Sirach."

Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does a theological commitment to God's transcendence necessarily imply that God is never to be expected to act within history? Does belief in God as acting within history mean that God is not transcendent? Can both be true?
2. Why do philosophers object to the notion of divine foreknowledge? That is, is there a genuine problem in claiming both that God already knows what we are going to choose and that we are truly free in our choices? If we are truly free in our choices, is there anything that already exists for anyone at all to know? Does it help in any way to say that God is not inside of time but outside of time (in eternity)?
3. Some scholars have compared the section of Sirach that is devoted to the history of Israel's patriarchs with the memory of an elderly person. Is it significant that many of the details of these stories are not mentioned and that sometimes the misdeeds and infidelities of the patriarchs are overlooked in the effort to provide examples of noble conduct?

Lecture Twenty-Three

The Song of Songs—Love as the Answer

Scope: Perhaps the answer to the problem of suffering is love. The Song of Songs, sometimes known as the Canticle of Canticles, is a series of love poems in which the lover and the beloved are united, then separated, then sought, and at last found. The references to the lover as “king” and to his beloved as “the Shulamite” have associated this book with Solomon and linked it to the Bible’s other wisdom books. This lecture will provide a general overview of the story and discuss the historical context of the time of its likely composition.

Outline

- I.** A novel approach to wisdom.
 - A.** The Song of Songs (in some Bibles called the Canticle of Canticles and in others the Song of Solomon) offers a distinctive answer as well as a distinctive approach (the love story) to the basic questions that motivate the biblical search for wisdom.
 - B.** Although one of the shortest of books in the entire Bible, with just 117 verses, it has been one of those books that have generated the most commentaries. It is deeply revered in both the Christian and Jewish traditions.
 - C.** What has generated so much commentary about the book is this: At the surface level of the text, it reads as a human love story that includes some rather sensuous details.
 - D.** Its defenders in Rabbinic Judaism argued that it is to be included in the canon as an inspired allegory about the love between God and his people.
 - E.** By contrast, most modern commentators emphasize what they regard as the plain sense of the text, despite some unusual and even bizarre parts of the story when it is taken exclusively at that level.
 - F.** This situation dramatically presents us with an important aspect of biblical interpretation besides those aspects that the other sapiential books have required us to study thus far: the presence of several levels of meaning in the scriptures.

- G. The task of the interpreter is to ascertain what, if any, other signification a text has beyond the plain sense, and to do so in a way that can warrant our confidence that this meaning somehow comes from the text and is not something being imposed on the text by the interpreter.

II. The plain-sense level of meaning.

- A. At the surface level of the text, what we have is a series of short poems that (taken together) recount a human love story, beginning with a woman (later identified as a bride) as she invites the embrace of her lover (subsequently identified as the king, presumably Solomon).
- B. For this lecture and the next, I will be using the translation that appears in the *New King James Version*, but if you have some other version, you may notice the effort of many editions to provide an identification of who is speaking, for the text does not always make this clear.
- C. While we lack the clues needed for understanding some of the lines of this poem, the main story is relatively clear.

III. The traditional Jewish and Christian understandings of the story in the Song of Songs.

- A. The mainstream tradition for this book in Rabbinic Judaism and in the Targum sees the poem as an allegory for the spousal love between God and Israel that was established by the covenant.
- B. At the surface level, certain items in the story seem very strange (e.g., the night wanderings or the haunting “who ... ?” questions, but it is only fair to admit here that we may be missing some clues to their understanding within the story, in the way that any text from any era contains allusions that a later age doesn’t recognize.
- C. Even the connection of the text to Solomon in the first line and by the royal imagery later on may well mean that the text is a veiled critique of Solomon’s polygamy. However, some who hold Solomon to be the author of the text have suggested that the woman is one of his wives, perhaps Pharaoh’s daughter.
- D. Traditional Christian exegesis has tended to accept this allegorical reading as one aspect of the spiritual sense of the text. But there are several additional points to note.

IV. Authorship and genre.

- A. The book has been attributed to Solomon by reason of its opening line, but for various reasons it may be wiser to regard this as yet another instance of an author from post-exilic Judaism claiming this traditional sage king as author. This is suggested by the Aramaic influences in the vocabulary.
 - B. Some modern scholars have speculated that the author may be an unidentified woman. Yet others, noting the difficulty of fitting the poems that constitute the book together into a consistent story, have suggested that there were several authors.
 - C. The text as we have it appears to be a certain amount of dialogue and a number of poems that are variously connected—sometimes quite strongly, more often quite loosely, and sometimes merely juxtaposed without connection.
 - D. As with Job, it may well be helpful for us to think about it as drama. (I don't mean that the text is formally drama in our modern sense.)
 - E. Where you see speakers clearly identified in any given translation, you should be aware that this is a decision made by the modern editors and not something that is actually present in the text.
- V. In the next lecture we will take up the text and the basic parts of its allegorical meaning, and so I would encourage you to read this rather brief text before the next lecture. If at all possible, you might find it very helpful to read it aloud, with different people taking the different parts. That may be a way to get a sense of the drama that we will be talking about.

Suggested Reading:

Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*.

Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, chap. 7.

De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*.

Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, chap. 3.

New King James Version of the Bible, Song of Songs.

U.S. Catholic Church, *Catechism*, §105–20.

Suggested Listening:

Da Palestrina, *Motets*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you understand the line from the Song of Songs, “Love is as strong as death”? One of the alternate readings for this line is “Love is stronger than death”—what difference would that make?
2. What significance is added to your understanding of the relationship between God and his chosen people by describing it as a marriage covenant? How does that interpretation add to the story of this book?

Lecture Twenty-Four

The Song of Songs—Levels of Meaning

Scope: How should we interpret the lovely poems of this book? Some readers of the Song of Songs prefer to treat this book at the literal level and to take its meaning simply in terms of a love story, or perhaps as the sanctification of love by a union that God blesses, even though God is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Others have preferred to see this book allegorically. The Jewish rabbinical tradition has often understood the relationship of lover and beloved as that between God and Israel. In this way, this tradition connects the love story told here with the use made of marriage as an image for the covenant that is developed in the prophet Hosea. Christian authors have often tended to see the allegory as extending to the relationship between Christ and the church. This lecture will examine some of these possibilities by considering the text of the Song of Songs.

Outline

- I.** Allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs.
 - A.** With due respect for the difficulties that scholars have raised about just who is talking to whom and where a given scene begins and ends, here is one attempt to follow the text. It is crucial to admit right here at the start that this interpretation is somewhat speculative.
 - B.** Imagine the Shulamite woman amid the daughters of Jerusalem, eager for the kisses of her beloved and then, in her imagination, directly addressing her beloved.
 - C.** Allegorically, the picture here is of Israel, deeply yearning not in the way we might at first expect, desiring something for herself (e.g., desiring a rescue from slavery), but simply and directly for the LORD himself.
 - D.** If we take the title Song of Songs as a kind of hint, the inner chambers into which she dreams that her lover, her king, has taken her could perhaps even be the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple where only the priests were permitted on occasion to go.

- E. When Christians understand the woman to be a figure of the church and, further, the individual soul, we might see in her a love for Christ as the Son of God incarnate, and perhaps for the Eucharistic body of our LORD.
- F. The explanation that the Shulamite woman gives to the daughters of Jerusalem about her sun-darkened skin discloses only that her brothers had put her out to work in a vineyard and that she had not guarded her own vineyard. Making her work outside risks making her look like a peasant who has had to work in the sun, perhaps as a kind of punishment by her brothers for some previous misbehavior.
- G. The next few lines bring the royal bridegroom upon the scene. The Shulamite changes her image from keeping a vineyard to shepherding a flock, and their tender dialogue shows us their mutual love.

II. Courtship (2:8–5:1).

- A. In the woman's soliloquy, she imagines her lover as leaping over mountains and then peering through the gate to implore her to come out to him. Like a doe venturing forth, she is still quite shy.
- B. Her mad search for her bridegroom is a strange scene at the level of the plain sense of the text.
- C. The otherwise mysterious passage that comes next is presumably about the procession toward the wedding, or perhaps the espousal ceremony, at the literal level.
- D. The ode to the flawless beauty of the beloved is in the man's voice. Allegorically, this is presumably the direct address by God to Israel.
- E. Awakened from sleep by her beloved (5:2–8), whom she hears knocking outside, she cannot find him at the door, and so she goes out again on the streets of the city on a wild, even desperate search. This time the police rough her up, thinking her a nightwalker.
- F. Her answer to the women (6:1–3) makes us wonder whether she thinks that they are going to help her, or whether she worries that they are planning to seek to have this man for themselves. What she says is that her beloved has gone down to his garden and to his flock, and again she insists on their mutual and exclusive union: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

III. Their reunion and recommitment (6:4–8:4).

- A. The lover compares his beloved (6:4–9) to the beauty of certain great cities of the ancient world, and then he extends the comparison to the 60 queens and 80 concubines and numberless maidens of some unidentified harem.
- B. At 6:10, the unanswered, perhaps unanswerable question “Who is this woman ... ?” occurs. Three amazing comparisons are involved in this question: a woman who is as fair as the moon, who is as bright as the sun, and who is terrible as an army with banners.
- C. The man speaks of going to his orchard, to see the blossoms and the pomegranates, and to stand in his war chariot. Presumably we have here the LORD visiting his temple and ready to be a warrior for his people.
- D. The man praises the loveliness of her dancing, for she dances for him alone and not in public, and their intercourse is made the sign of the fullness of their marital union.
- E. The section ends with several verses in which the woman yearns for union with her spouse, and the chorus repeats the “who ...” questions yet a fourth time.

IV. Summary.

- A. If one were to attempt a brief summary of the wisdom of this book, the central point might be that rightly order is crucial, and that God’s love for Israel—and likewise, Christ’s love for the church—is being displayed allegorically through a story about the emotions and passions of love.
- B. The story moves through several episodes in which that love is tested and could easily go astray.
- C. The love of the spouses leads to a firm marriage commitment that is permanent and exclusive—a type of union that is praiseworthy in itself as well as being a suitable allegorical vehicle for the higher levels of being accessible through a careful interpretation of the text.

Suggested Reading:

Estes, *Handbook*, 393–444.

Garrett, *Song of Songs*.

Jenson, *Song of Songs*.

Murphy, *The Song of Songs*.

Pope, *Song of Songs*.

Questions to Consider:

1. For allegory to succeed, the literal story line should work well. Do you find that the basic story line is internally consistent and tells a significant story?
2. What elements of the basic story line especially suggest the covenant relation between God and Israel or between Christ and the church?
3. Some commentators have suggested that the Song of Songs provides as its own answer to the problem of suffering that it is love that must prevail. How do you evaluate this answer?

Lecture Twenty-Five

Interlude—Wisdom Psalms on Perseverance

Scope: This lecture will continue our practice of dipping from time to time into the treasury of the Psalter, this time to consider a number of psalms that are especially relevant for moments when perseverance is needed to counter delay and discouragement. The range of emotions and feelings that come to our attention in texts like the Song of Songs make this an opportune time to consider the role of prayer and wise guidance in the healing of injuries and in the right ordering of emotions.

Outline

- I. Ordering our loves aright.**
 - A.** By this point in our course, it is quite clear that the Bible's wisdom teaching is not of some abstract sort—it is frequently wisdom of heart as much as of head.
 - B.** To give one's love, heart and soul, to God as to a spouse, in the way that the Song of Songs suggests both literally and allegorically, requires a deep purity of heart. That notion—"purity of heart"—rings through the psalms and will echo in the wisdom teaching of the New Testament (e.g., in the Beatitudes).
- II. Scriptural vocabulary.**
 - A.** Because the Hebrew of the scriptures tends to be very concrete, translators face some important choices. If they aim for too literal a rendering of the text, we will be reading not just about "heart" but about "liver" and "loins" and any number of other internal organs. If they are too abstract or too free with their translations, we will miss half the point that it is through the body that we carry out the choices we make and that we express ourselves.
 - B.** In part, the problem that we face in understanding biblical terminology right is actually a philosophical problem. Ever since the beginning of the modern era, many Western languages and the cultural outlook that shapes them have come to reflect a certain dualism of mind and body.

- C. The Bible takes an approach quite different from that of any dualist or materialist philosophy. Whether in the Creation story of Genesis or in the psalms that we will consider here, there is a strong sense of the unity of the material and the spiritual elements in each human being.
- D. Interestingly, with the use of Greek terms like *psyche* (soul) as the translation of *nephesh* in the deuterocanonical (apocryphal) writings of the Old Testament as well as the whole of the New Testament, the shift in language will help to open up a crucial part of the Christian answer to the problem of suffering and death.
- E. Here in the psalms we do well to ponder the ways in which the vocabulary of heart and liver and breath and life is used to express the inner depths of personal subjectivity as ways for expressing the self, the feelings, the emotions, and the inner core of the person.

III. Praying for purity of heart.

- A. Psalm 73 [72] opens with a strong sense of the difference between the “pure of heart” and “the proud” in a way that reminds us of the recurrent problem of wisdom literature.
- B. One of the aspects of biblical prayer that I personally find most helpful is the brutal honesty that it shows. Praying a psalm like this one summons us to speak the simple truth.
- C. I find that verses like these are very helpful in praying for genuine honesty in my examinations of conscience, especially if there is any hint of self-pity or feeling sorry for myself.
- D. The psalmist’s first move is to make clear to himself during his prayer just how he is really feeling. Once what he is truly feeling gets expressed, he can see that there is something untoward. What exactly to do about it is not clear, and so he begs for the grace of God’s light to penetrate the mystery.
- E. These lines tell both about one’s conduct on earth and one’s hope of heaven. They speak of God not just in an earthly way but as “my portion forever.” They express a confidence that God will resolve the problems of present injustice and rectify wrong.

IV. A reflection on this kind of prayer.

- A. In praying this or any psalm, there is obviously no guarantee that one will feel what the psalmist is feeling or will experience the progress, the movement of spirit, that the psalmist is recording. Rather, the point is that the psalms are recognized to have God's sanction and approval as a way for us to pray.
- B. In a psalm like this one, the lesson for our prayer (it seems to me) might be to learn to pause, with the psalmist, and to reflect for as long as we need to.
- C. A psalm like this one gives us the encouragement to bring ourselves just as we are before the LORD. We may need some special grace to set our distorted loves back into right order or to make a good judgment in the presence of conflicting feelings.
- D. It seems to me that the psalmist must be someone who has been trained in the school of prayer—someone who knows how to wait and how to discern the difference between an untrustworthy feeling and a sound one, a fallacious line of reasoning and a true one.
- E. When we make an act of trust, it is not that we are always already feeling it but that we know we need to make that act of trust in God, and we hope that he will bring the feeling.

V. Application of the Song of Songs.

- A. I chose this psalm and this theme in light of the situation of the protagonist in the Song of Songs.
- B. The structure that I use begins with a prayer of gratitude to God for what the day has brought and a prayer of request for the light to see what God wants me to see.
- C. This is a spiritual exercise you might want to try the next time you find that you are “replaying the tape” of some difficult conversation or angry moment over and over again in the course of the day.

Suggested Reading:

Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*.

Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What works best for you when you need to face something in prayer and find it easy to distract yourself and hard to stay focused?
2. What, if any, is the point of staying quiet, without speaking, in prayer, until at least the time you have decided to devote to prayer has passed? Many writers on prayer recommend this practice. What do you think?
3. The psalmist exemplifies the practice of acknowledging his feelings before he judges them and decides what to do about them. What works for you with respect to getting yourself an honest assessment of your feelings? By what standards should one decide how best to deal with them?

Lecture Twenty-Six

Daniel—Wisdom through Dream Visions

Scope: The book of Daniel is clearly one of the later books of the Hebrew Bible (2nd century B.C.) and is sometimes classified with the prophetic books, but it warrants inclusion here by virtue of its dream visions, which can rightly be considered as a special kind of wisdom. This lecture will consider the question of its historical context and likely date as well as the textual problems that arise from the inclusion of certain passages in the deuterocanonical version that are regarded as apocryphal in the Jewish canon, such as the psalm of Azariah, the canticle of the three young men, the story of Susanna, and the satires on idolatry. After providing a general orientation to the book as a whole, the lecture will concentrate on the dream visions given to Daniel in chapters 1–6 as especially germane to the wisdom tradition.

Outline

- I.** Why consider Daniel a wisdom book?
 - A.** Earlier in this course we took note of the various approaches to wisdom in the Bible, and in the book of Daniel we find yet another kind.
 - B.** In Daniel we find an approach to wisdom through dreams and visions. One might call it a kind of prophetic wisdom, an insight that comes from divine revelation through the discernment of signs that are given in sleep and in contemplation.
- II.** The Bible and dreams.
 - A.** While books like Sirach generally warn against putting one's stock in dreams, Sirach does make an exception for dreams sent by God.
 - B.** In addition to the provision made for an authentic vision in the lines just quoted from Sirach, there is also the favorable outlook on dreams and visions in Joel and the interesting precedent for the possibility of reliable dream interpretation in the case of Joseph in Genesis.

- C. The text of Daniel presents Daniel and his three companions as blessed by God with wisdom, and both the Jewish and Christian traditions have accepted Daniel within their canons.

III. General orientation to the book.

- A. The book has two parts: six chapters with edifying stories about Daniel as a model of heroic virtue, and then six chapters of his visions of God's providential plans for history.
- B. There are also some additional chapters that appear in the deuterocanonical (apocryphal) version that contain additional stories of virtuous heroism that make an important contribution to the wisdom character of the book by showing a very wise Daniel.
- C. The middle portion of the book is in the Aramaic language, with the beginning and the subsequent sections in Hebrew; from chapter 13 on, the text is available only in Greek.
- D. For this book and the remainder of the Old Testament passages, I will make use of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

IV. The historical context of the book's composition.

- A. As we saw in our discussion of Sirach, the rivalry between the generals who succeeded Alexander the Great (Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in Syria, Babylon, and Persia) included competition for Palestine until Pompey conquered the entire region in 63 B.C.
- B. While the Ptolemies still controlled Palestine during the 3rd century B.C., larger numbers of Jews actually lived in the Diaspora than in Palestine, including many who came to Alexandria, where the Septuagint translation of the Bible was made.
- C. By 167 B.C., the office of the high priest had been seized, pagan worship had begun, and through the use of Hellenistic gymnasia there was pressure on Jewish youth to be ashamed of such customs as circumcision.
- D. Antiochus desecrated the temple, confiscated sacred vessels, and then set up an altar to Olympian Zeus within the temple. He made Jewish religious practice a crime of treason and required the local authorities to accept the notion that the God of Israel was identical to the Greek Zeus, with Antiochus himself as his earthly regent.
- E. Some aristocrats adapted themselves to Greek ways, but others resisted. Some resisted violently, while others encouraged resistance without violence.

V. The historical setting of the book.

- A.** The story recounted in Daniel comes not from the time of Antiochus but from the time of Israel's previous great crisis, the beginning of the exile from the southern kingdom of Judah at the moment of its collapse.
- B.** Setting the stories of Daniel during the Babylonian exile at the courts of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius testifies to the fact that troubles of this sort had happened before and that God could be trusted to provide courage in the face of persecution, and wisdom when specially needed.

VI. The wisdom elements in the book of Daniel.

- A.** The opening description of Daniel and his friends stresses their training in wisdom and their refusal to be corrupted by foreign wisdom.
- B.** When the sages whom Nebuchadnezzar commanded to interpret some dreams that had troubled him prove unable to do so, he threatens all his wise men with death.
- C.** When Daniel then interprets the image, Nebuchadnezzar appoints Daniel and his friends to positions of honor and rule.
- D.** Those jealous of their positions reveal that Daniel's three companions have refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. He has them cast into a fire heated seven times more than usual, and yet they—plus a mysterious fourth one who is “like a son of the gods” (3:25)—remain unburned. Nebuchadnezzar chalks this up to the protection of their own God (3:28) and frees them.
- E.** The final episode recounted here is the one in which Daniel is thrown into the lion pit for daring to pray to his God. His miraculous deliverance from death elicits a prayer of faith from King Darius and allows Daniel to prosper into the year of Cyrus.

VII. Wisdom in dreams.

- A.** It is not merely Freudian psychology that has seen significance in dreams. The ancient world also had a profound sense of the importance of dreams.
- B.** The text of Daniel turns next to Daniel's own dreams and visions, and we will follow the text in our next lecture, where we will also reflect further on Daniel as a wisdom book.

Suggested Reading:

Collins, *Daniel*.

Goldingay, *Daniel*.

The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, book of Daniel.

Questions to Consider:

1. What was the “abomination of desolation”? Why did it so appall the author?
2. What do you regard as the main point of the stories in the first section of Daniel?
3. Can there be wisdom in dreams and in stories about dream interpretations? What would you say to the objection that this is “just another story”?

Lecture Twenty-Seven

Daniel—God’s Providential Plan for History

Scope: The latter portions of the book of Daniel concern eschatology—that is, theological reflections on the end times. This lecture will examine chapters 7 to 12, with their mysterious references to a wisdom figure called “Son of Man,” the theme of messianic hope, and the additional materials (chapters 13–14) from the Greek text. Like the book of Sirach, the book of Daniel offers an approach to the question of where to seek wisdom by looking to history and to a theology of history. This lecture will consider the book of Daniel by a consideration of its allusions and comments on the various stages of the world’s history taken as parts of God’s providential plan. The portions of this book about the revelation of God’s eternal purpose through the angels will provide an opportunity to reflect on the nature of revelation and its relation to wisdom.

Outline

- I.** Wisdom themes in Daniel 7–12.
 - A.** The technical name for the genre that we find in the second six chapters is “apocalyptic”—a form that uses various symbols to disclose the plan of God for the world in light of a final universal judgment.
 - B.** In Daniel, we find the combination of prophetic urgency in summoning the people to repentance with the wisdom literature’s traditional stress on the fear of the LORD as the beginning of wisdom and virtue.
 - C.** Just as the figure of Daniel was marked in the first section by his understanding of the plan of God within dreams, in this second section he is given the wisdom of God through an angel so as to grasp the way in which God is directing history.
- II.** Daniel’s visions.
 - A.** Daniel 7:1–28. Upon inquiry (7:16), Daniel learns that this vision showed successive earthly kingdoms, the persecution of the holy ones (Hasidim), and God’s own establishment of his kingdom.

- B. Daniel 8:1–27. As the language of the text returns from Aramaic to Hebrew, we see a ram with two horns of unequal heights whose charges no one could withstand. The ram dominates until the coming of a goat from the west with a single horn. The goat grows magnificent, but its horn eventually breaks and gives way to four horns. From one of them came a horn that grew great and dominated the sanctuary where sacrifices are made. The period of the desolation is to last “2,300 evenings and mornings” until the sanctuary is restored.
- C. Daniel 9:1–27. After Daniel recognizes that the desolations of Jerusalem must last 70 years, he confesses his own sins and the transgressions of the people to God. Gabriel then comes to Daniel during the evening sacrifice and gives a mysterious timetable (“70 weeks of years”—perhaps 70×7 , or 490-some years) for the completion of the necessary atonement, the coming of an anointed one (*messiah*), the destruction of the holy city, and a “strong covenant.”
- D. Daniel 10:1–12:13. After three weeks of mourning, Daniel receives a vision about the history from Cyrus the Persian to the defeat of Antiochus. Gabriel bids Daniel not to fear and strengthens him in his weakness. Daniel is urged to persevere through troubled times.

III. Resurrection of the body in Daniel, chapter 12.

- A. In the last chapter of this section there occurs, for the first time in the Bible, an explicit reference to the resurrection of the body.
- B. While this theme is not developed very far here, it is of great interest for the study of biblical wisdom literature, especially in view of the problem of the righteous and just who suffer and die while the unjust and those who persecute them prosper.
- C. There are also some references in the Psalms that might have bearing here.

IV. The deuterocanonical materials.

- A. The Greek version of Daniel is regarded as part of the deuterocanonical section for Catholics and Orthodox, and as part of the apocrypha for others. The Greek text for chapter 13 that is translated in most Bibles is not the Septuagint but another Greek translation, called the Theodotion translation after the name of the translator.

- B. Like the stories in the first six chapters, these stories are tales of heroic virtue. By the achievement of justice here we have not only an important wisdom theme in the tradition of Proverbs and Sirach, but a portrayal of Daniel as a young Solomon.
- C. In the final stories, we find Daniel confronting false worship. The stories are set in the time of King Cyrus of Babylon.

V. Overview.

- A. All considered, the book of Daniel is different from the main streams of biblical wisdom literature that we have seen in the didactic lessons of Proverbs and Sirach as well as from the dramatic presentations of the philosophical search for wisdom in Job and Qoheleth. Nor is it the lyrical poetry of Song of Songs.
- B. In a trajectory that runs from Sirach to the Wisdom of Solomon, there is a great concern with God's role in history. Where Sirach and Wisdom look back on the role of divine providence in giving wisdom to guide his chosen people, the visions of Daniel look ahead to the guidance God will provide.
- C. In addition, for the first time, the Bible presents a picture of resurrection from the dead, and this notion will prove to be very important for the next book that we study, the Wisdom of Solomon.

Suggested Reading:

Davies, *Daniel*.

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 486–99.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the difference between the first and second sections of this book?
2. How would you define “apocalyptic”? What are the likenesses and differences between this version of the apocalyptic genre and others that you may know (e.g., Revelation in the New Testament)?
3. What are the chief characteristics of the figure of Daniel as he appears in this book?

Lecture Twenty-Eight

The Wisdom of Solomon on Divine Justice

Scope: As in the case of Qoheleth and the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon is attributed to King Solomon, the greatest sage in Israel's history, even though its actual date of composition is much later (presumably the 1st century B.C.). Written especially for Jews whose faith was shaken by the attractions of Hellenistic Alexandria—its mystery religions and its philosophical sophistication—this book consists of three clear parts: (1) the function of wisdom in instructing the faithful about the opposite destinies awaiting the virtuous and the wicked during this life and in the afterlife, (2) the discourse of King Solomon to his fellow rulers about the origin and nature of wisdom, and (3) a recitation of the role played by divine wisdom and providence in the history of the chosen people. After reviewing the historical context and the structure of the book, this lecture will consider the opening section as it reflects on the traditional concern of biblical wisdom, the choice between the ways of virtue and vice.

Outline

- I. Background.**
 - A.** Like Sirach and the final two chapters of Daniel, the book called the Wisdom of Solomon is regarded as deuterocanonical, or apocryphal. There is no doubt that it is a book composed within the Jewish community of the Diaspora in Alexandria, but the only text that we have of the book is in Greek, so it is not in the Jewish canon of holy scripture.
 - B.** Like Daniel before it and anticipating the New Testament that comes later, it has a clear place for the idea of resurrection of the body, and it also mentions the idea of the immortality of the soul.
- II. Historical setting for the book's composition.**
 - A.** The victory of Pompey the Great in his campaign for Roman control of the eastern Mediterranean between 67 and 63 B.C. included not only a naval struggle against the pirate fleets then menacing the Mediterranean but also land battles against Mithridates, the king of Pontus in Asia Minor, and Tigranes, the king of Armenia.

- B.** In the course of his campaign, Pompey found it advantageous to enter into the internecine struggle between two Jewish brothers, Hyrcanus (with the Pharisees) and Aristobulus (with the Sadducees).
- C.** After Brutus and Cassius from Pompey's party assassinated Caesar in 44 B.C., Caesar's adopted son Octavian entered into a triumvirate with Marc Antony and Lepidus. By 42 B.C., they had defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi.
- D.** Palestine began to be dominated by the Herodian family from the time when Antipater II, as military commander, joined forces with Hyrcanus II, whom Pompey had established as the high priest.
- E.** In the 1st century B.C., the Jewish community within the metropolis of Alexandria was strongly connected to Jerusalem. Earlier in our lecture series we noted that the Septuagint was produced there and that it was there that the grandson of Jesus Ben-Sirach, who wrote his text in Jerusalem, translated it into Greek.
- F.** In the decade or so before the birth of Philo, an author whose name we do not know, working under the persona of Solomon, used Greek to write the book that we are about to study.
- G.** As with Sirach, the intended audience for the book seems to have been the younger generation then being attracted to forsake their religion as outdated and primitive in comparison with the enchantments of Greek culture.
- H.** The Wisdom of Solomon will have an entirely different attitude toward death, and its mention of the afterlife gives a wholly different vision of things. In the third part, the book also strongly rejects the alluring mystery cults in the course of a vivid and satirical attack on idolatry.

III. Structure.

- A.** The dramatic setting for the book is an address by King Solomon to the other kings of the earth.
- B.** The book has three parts.

IV. The opening chapter.

- A. Perhaps it was the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Alexandria and the imperial politics of the day that prompted the author of the Wisdom of Solomon to begin his book as an address to the “rulers of the earth.”
- B. Before the book concludes, it will turn to the events of Exodus, which would presumably have then been unknown to any but a Jewish authorship, but the opening chapters (depending on how we interpret several crucial terms) should presumably be read to have a rather universal flavor.
- C. In Greek, the usual translation for *Adonai* is *kyrios*, whether *Adonai* is being used as a substitute for YHWH or in its own right simply as a term of respect.
- D. The term *kyrios* in Wisdom could be heard by one familiar with Hebrew as something associated with the tetragrammaton but could equally well be heard by someone familiar only with Greek as a mark of respect—presumably for “God” (*theos*, which is used in verse 3) but understood in general as divinity.
- E. Without trying to settle all of those questions, my point here is simply to maintain that one could well understand by words like these something quite specifically Jewish (e.g., “think of YHWH and observe Torah”) or something far more general (e.g., “be mindful of God and seek justice”).
- F. Throughout the book, there will be good reason for thinking that both of these approaches are quite legitimate, for the author appears to have in mind both the Alexandrian community of Jews in Diaspora and the cosmopolitan community of the rulers of the earth.

V. The relation of wisdom and virtue.

- A. The inward focus of the rest of these first verses (e.g., “sincerity of heart”) supports a profound connection between wisdom and virtue. This same attentiveness to conscience is manifest a few verses later.
- B. There is a sequence and a direction assumed here: Wisdom is a fruit that may be expected from moral virtue. Good choices must be made, and a good character established. By contrast, wisdom will flee from someone given to foolish thinking and deceitful actions.

- C. As in some of the other wisdom literature that we have examined, there is a personal way of speaking about wisdom here that is connected with the moral exhortations of the books that focus on proverbial wisdom.
- D. Even the use of parallel clauses echoes the style of Hebrew verse construction, while the personal reference to “the Spirit of the LORD” (capitalized here by the Revised Standard Version) both echoes back to the wisdom poems of Proverbs, Job, and Sirach as well as looks forward to what Christians will regard as the Holy Spirit.

VI. In the next lecture we will consider the book’s concern, even from its opening chapter, with life and death. What we have seen already is the pairing of the ways of virtue and vice that is highly traditional in sapiential literature.

Suggested Reading:

Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, chap. 7.

Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, chap. 6.

Winston, *The Anchor Bible: The Wisdom of Solomon*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How would you define “justice” and “righteousness”? These are multidimensional realities. What should we include in our ideas of justice and righteousness in order to make them full and adequate descriptions?
2. The book makes an interesting assertion about what it takes to receive wisdom when it asserts that one needs a peaceful conscience. What is conscience, and why does a guilty conscience make it hard to get an accurate perspective on things?
3. What does “the Spirit of the LORD” mean? How do you understand the references to spirit in the opening chapter of Wisdom?

Lecture Twenty-Nine

The Wisdom of Solomon on Death

Scope: In the first five chapters of the book of Wisdom, we find important material on the traditional wisdom problem of the suffering of the innocent, in this case the tragic death of those who died for their virtuous observance of the Torah. Earlier books in the sapiential tradition had raised questions in the spirit of theodicy about God's justice and about making sense of life and history. This book finds the answer to those questions in God's gift of immortality to the virtuous and the expectation of retribution for the wicked in the afterlife. This lecture will consider the book's treatment of the topics of the covenant and the immortality of the soul.

Outline

- I.** The connection between righteousness and immortality.
 - A.** The book opens with a set of contrasting associations between wisdom and virtue on the one hand and foolishness and vice on the other. This approach is very traditional for wisdom books.
 - B.** The author's first mention of death alludes to Genesis and directs us to remember the purpose of God's plan in creation.
 - C.** As we go forward, we will have reason to hold that it is not only physical death (death of the body) that is under discussion here, but spiritual death (death of the soul through godlessness and sin) that is the author's concern.
- II.** The coming of death into the world.
 - A.** Death is, in Genesis, the punishment of sin—we might think of it as a kind of frustration of the divine plan that God allows to happen so that human beings can exercise their freedom, for one of the requirements of freedom is that actions have their consequences.
 - B.** The text explicitly associated righteousness with immortality. Mainstream tradition holds that one must truly cooperate with God's grace and that without God's grace, no amount of human effort will achieve the task.

III. Persecuted and persecutors will unexpectedly change places (1:16–5:23).

- A. The rulers of the earth are addressed at the beginning of the book with the encouragement to love righteousness so that wisdom may settle upon them.
- B. No details are provided about any specific situation at the opening of the story; there is simply the case of ungodly men who have made some kind of arrangement with death.
- C. The second chapter exhibits the thought processes of these evildoers and shows that their psychology involves the denial of any existence beyond the grave and hence the lack of any reason not to try and get away with what they can during life.
- D. We might have thought such materialism a modern invention, but in antiquity this is, in substance, the position of Epicurean philosophy, and we would do well to pause for a moment on this.
- E. At the core of the Epicurean position is precisely the sort of godlessness that the Wisdom of Solomon is addressing. It was Epicurus's view that to be rid of the pain of unnecessary fear, one needs to rid oneself of the illusions of God and of the afterlife.
- F. In setting forth the reasoning here, the text portrays someone who still thinks in such biblical categories as "creation," "righteousness," and "sin" even while taking a position diametrically opposed to the Bible.
- G. Blinded by their wickedness, the speakers devise a plot to see if the righteous will hold fast to the end in their righteousness (2:13–20). The narrator, however, comments on what they failed to understand, especially what the immortal God intended when creating humankind.

IV. The suffering and death of the righteous (3:1–4:19).

- A. Chapter 3 and most of chapter 4 offer a wisdom perspective on the problem of innocent suffering by treating them from the divine perspective.
- B. Like Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon can envision that suffering can be a way to test and to purify. Some Christians subsequently applied lines like these to the doctrine of purgatory, but they also make sense when applied to earthly trials.

- C. Throughout this material, the author keeps the focus on moral psychology—that is, the explanation of how it is that we deliberate about moral questions and how we come to the decisions we do.
- V. The judgment of the righteous on the godless, and God’s justice (4:20–5:23).
 - A. The dramatic surprise in the story comes with a scene that is set after the death of both parties. Suddenly, the roles are reversed, and those who were the persecuted now become the judges of their persecutors.
 - B. The narrator explains the result—not in some Greek philosophical argumentation like Plato’s about a natural immortality but in his own distinctive approach to immortality as the gift that God gives to those who observe his commandments and honor his will.
 - C. I stress the difference between the approach to the question of immortality in Greek philosophy and the approach taken here, simply because some readers have interpreted this book as if it were not sufficiently biblical or were too much indebted to Greek philosophy.
 - D. In my judgment, it does take up some of the concerns of Greek philosophy as well as some of the vocabulary, but as our further study will continue to show, it clearly adapts the meaning of the terms borrowed from Hellenistic philosophy for its own purposes—guided, I think, by the inspiration of the God who is making this revelation.
- VI. In the next lecture we will turn to the considerations that the author in the persona of Solomon addresses to the kings of the earth as a reflection on this story.

Suggested Reading:

Becker, *The Denial of Death*.

Kolarcik, *The Ambiguity of Death*.

Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What does the Wisdom of Solomon hold to be at the root of all sin?
How do you see it?
2. Why do people fear death (whether they think that there is an afterlife or not)? Does it make any sense to fear death if death is simply annihilation (for then presumably one will not be present to experience that annihilation)?
3. Is there a reason for persevering in moral goodness at all costs if there is nothing beyond this life?

Lecture Thirty

The Wisdom of Solomon on Prayer

Scope: In the tradition of biblical wisdom literature, the middle portion of the Wisdom of Solomon has a lovely wisdom poem in chapters 7 and 8. The setting for this poem is a monologue presented by King Solomon to his fellow rulers. He stresses the duty of kings to cultivate wisdom in order to rise to the challenge of their office. To encourage them to take the means necessary to receive and embrace this instruction in wisdom, he recounts his own life story and offers his poem in praise of Wisdom (a personified figure like the one found in Proverbs) as the source of both theoretical knowledge about the world and practical knowledge useful for the problems of life. The ninth chapter provides a lesson for the kings in how to pray for wisdom. This lecture will focus on chapters 6–9 of the text, with particular attention to the interplay of practical and speculative wisdom.

Outline

- I.** The structure of the second part of Wisdom (6:1–9:18).
 - A.** Just as in the opening line (1:1), the author (in the persona of Solomon) again addresses the kings of the earth at the start of the second part of the text. Whether the author had any realistic expectations that such kings would be likely to read the text is unclear.
 - B.** But for the likely readers of the book among the Jewish community of Alexandria, this might have proven an interesting perspective: what Solomon, their great sage, might have said if given the chance to address an international community.
 - C.** The structure of this portion of the text.
 - 1.** Solomon's exhortation to his fellows about the need to seek wisdom from God.
 - 2.** His testimony that it was prayer that brought him the wisdom for which he is known.
 - 3.** His poem in praise of Wisdom.
 - 4.** Solomon's further testimony about his courtship of Wisdom.

5. His way of modeling for them the prayer they need to make for wisdom.

II. Solomon's exhortation on the need for rulers to seek wisdom from God (6:1–12).

- A. The connection between the story of the first part of the book and the kings who are addressed is clear from the exhortation that opens the second part: Just as those who abused their power in the story, so too any ruler who abuses power can expect to be held to account.
- B. It is not only the general point that anyone and everyone should expect to render an account of himself, although that in itself would presumably be telling.
- C. There is also a claim about what one might want to call the Bible's political philosophy—a claim that has had a long history in subsequent political thought, namely that because all authority derives from God, rulers can expect to be judged by a strict standard.
- D. This assertion need not be thought simply identical with the claim about the divine right of kings championed by absolutist rulers during the early modern period of history.
- E. A more modest but, in my judgment, more promising way to understand the point comes through a distinction between power (the ability to compel) and authority (the moral status of being entrusted with power and being responsible for any use of that power).

III. Solomon's testimony about his own need for prayer (6:13–7:22a).

- A. Besides the reminder that rulers will have to give an account of their stewardship, Solomon spends much time praising the joys of Wisdom and assuring his fellow kings that even a sincere desire for instruction is the beginning of all wisdom, just as keeping the moral law is an assurance of immortality.
- B. The persona of Solomon then presents himself in an extremely humble way, not as naturally wise but as any other mortal, in need of praying for wisdom.

- C. Solomon then testifies to loving the pursuit of divine wisdom more than everything else, and he attributes to God everything that he has received, both of a speculative nature about the elements, the seasons, and the stars and about the practical affairs of statecraft.

IV. The wisdom poem (7:22b–8:1).

- A. The wisdom poem, like the others in the tradition before it, envisions wisdom as personified and with all lovely qualities—in fact, some 21 of them are listed.
- B. Wisdom is the mother of the virtue and righteousness that lead to immortality and stand before the very throne of God.
- C. Many Jewish and Christian commentators with a philosophical bent found special attraction in the lines that deal with the pervasiveness of this divine wisdom as that which makes everything about the universe intelligible because of its order.

V. Solomon on the need for courting Wisdom (8:2–21) and his prayer (9:1–18).

- A. Using the imagery of marriage, Solomon testifies to his need to court Wisdom as a bride.
- B. He then acknowledges that it is she who has made anyone wise and virtuous. Within the following text we see in particular the four cardinal virtues famous from Greek philosophy: self-control (moderation), prudence (practical wisdom), justice (righteousness), and courage (fortitude).
- C. How, Solomon reasons, could he not be willing to take whatever means are necessary in order to obtain what he desires?

VI. Solomon's prayer (9:1–18).

- A. Mindful that his fellow kings might need instruction in prayer (like the rest of us), Solomon recounts the prayer that he made to God for wisdom.
- B. He acknowledges his own lack of wisdom and yet his urgent need for it, especially given the role he is expected to play for his people.
- C. He then praises the wisdom that dwells with God and pleads to be given this gift. One can hear some of the same thoughts that made up the speeches and counterspeeches in Job, but here they are simply put in the service of prayer.

VII. In the following lecture we will examine the final portion of the book, a scriptural illustration from the events of Exodus about the points that Solomon has been making at the general level in his address to his fellow kings.

Suggested Reading:

Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*, 133–57, 178–221.

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 564–81.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do you understand to be the difference between power and authority? Can you think of some examples? What would happen if there were no such distinction, that is, if all authority were merely power?
2. On the basis of what the figure of Solomon says in this part of Wisdom, what are the main duties and responsibilities of a ruler?
3. If you were to compose a prayer for the specific sorts of wisdom that you need, what would you include in your request?

Lecture Thirty-One

The Wisdom of Solomon on Divine Providence

Scope: The third portion of the Wisdom of Solomon (chapters 10 to 19) adopts a strategy similar to the last portion of Sirach with its attention to the proactive role of God's providential wisdom in the history of the chosen people. This lecture will focus on four elements that are distinctive in this book: (1) the use of a certain amount of Greek philosophy within a biblical text, (2) the parallels between this book's account of biblical history and the philosophical tradition of natural law ethics, (3) the use of satire (chapters 13 to 15) to ridicule the folly involved in idolatry, and (4) the intimations of a doctrine of resurrection of the body within the book's teachings on the immortality of the soul.

Outline

- I.** The final section of Wisdom (10:1–19:22).
 - A.** The contrast between the righteous and the godless in the chapters that open the book is picked up again in the contrast between Israel and Egypt in the time of Moses and the covenant.
 - B.** If we bear in mind the focus throughout the Wisdom of Solomon on the plight of Alexandrian Jews who might be susceptible to the forces of Hellenistic culture, it will readily become clear that the elaborate account of the struggle between Israel and Egypt from Exodus being retold here really pertains to the Jewish community in Diaspora.
 - C.** The idolatry of the Egyptians at the time of Moses as described here bears more than a passing resemblance to the orgiastic mystery cults of Dionysus typical of the Roman Empire in the Hellenistic period.
 - D.** The structure of this material is somewhat complex: a narration of the history of God's chosen people, with special emphasis on a series of comparisons between Israel and Egypt, plus two lengthy meditations.

II. From Creation to the Exodus (10:1–11:14).

- A.** Without mentioning any names, the 10th chapter of Wisdom briefly recounts a series of stories from Genesis and Exodus that would easily be recognizable to the Jews in Diaspora at Alexandria. Each story emphasizes the saving work of wisdom.
- B.** Just in case the lesson might be lost by this speedy review of events from early in the Bible, the text pauses to draw the lesson.
- C.** In the extended treatment between Israel and Egypt, there is not only a contrast between the righteous and the unrighteous but also in the way the same natural element is used for salvation and destruction.
- D.** Here the author announces the theme and then exemplifies it by contrasting the first of the plagues, the waters of the Nile that become filled with blood (according to Exodus 7), with the water that God provided to Israel in the desert.

III. A meditation on divine power and mercy (11:15–12:27).

- A.** The address shifts from the kings, who are supposed to listen to these stories, to God himself, who is addressed directly and praised for his goodness. This section seems to be the voice of the Wisdom of Solomon in the long-standing debate within wisdom literature about the goodness and power of God.
- B.** With the support of allusions to a grand variety of passages from Torah, the author acknowledges the purpose of displays of divine power.
- C.** In lines like these, we see the author's deep-seated perspective about the goodness of creation and God's readiness to spare not only Israel (12:12–22) but also her enemies, if only they would repent, as in the sections devoted to the Canaanites (12:3–11) and Egyptians (12:13–27).

IV. Meditation on the temptations to idolatry (13:1–15:19).

- A.** From a relatively specific mention of Egyptian idolatry, the author turns to a more general critique of idolatry, beginning with various forms of nature worship.
- B.** Even apart from divine revelation, one should be able to know enough about the existence of God and the need to worship God as the author of nature rather than to worship nature itself.

- C. While the author cannot dismiss this confusion between creature and Creator, he finds it less blameworthy than those who make idols for themselves.
 - D. Pagan rituals turn into their own punishments: People devoting themselves to their passions stifle even the slightest inclination toward holiness and eternal life.
 - E. As in the opening portion of the book, there are several allusions to immortality in the final portion of the book.
- V. The plagues of Egypt (16:1–19:22).
- A. The final section of the text continues with the series of contrasts between the righteous (those who have kept the commandments) and the ungodly (those who have violated the commandments).
 - B. They are organized on the same model as the author's contrast of water and blood in chapter 11, by listing the ways in which divine wisdom used similar elements from nature for the salvation of Israel and the destruction of the Egyptians.
 - C. After this dramatically recounted set of comparisons, the book ends in simple praise.
- VI. As in Sirach, what is most prominent in wisdom literature of this sort is memory: Wisdom is a matter of keeping present to one's mind the covenant and the promises.
- A. The Wisdom of Solomon as a whole thus combines some of the prominent approaches to wisdom that we have seen before. In the cultivation of historical memory, the book functions like Proverbs and Sirach to exhort us with the prospect of divine intervention on behalf of the just.
 - B. In the meantime, the counsel of the Wisdom of Solomon is fidelity in prayer, so in the next lecture we will turn once again to the Psalms.

Suggested Reading:

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 564–82.

Leaney, *The Jewish and Christian World 200 B.C. to A.D. 200*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How is the attack on idolatry in Wisdom of Solomon related to the concerns of the Torah? What factors in the historical situation prompted this renewal of emphasis?
2. According to Wisdom, what effect does idolatry have on the worshiper? How does the text try to warn believers against these practices? What parallels are there today?
3. What purpose does the review of historical events from Exodus serve in the book of Wisdom? What is the significance of telling Israel's stories without naming the individuals who played great roles in that history? Why the concentration on each of the plagues?

Lecture Thirty-Two

Interlude—A Wisdom Psalm on Torah

Scope: Just as the latter books of biblical wisdom literature often emphasize the connections between Wisdom and Torah according to the traditional understanding of God's covenant with the chosen people, so too do a number of psalms. This lecture will focus on a psalm that exhibits this theme and then reflects on the importance of prayer for conforming oneself to the covenant that God has created. In the course of this lecture there will be an opportunity to reflect also on the theme of prayer for the spiritual gifts that are mentioned in Wisdom as well as in Isaiah.

Outline

- I. Praying with the Psalms.**
 - A.** When we have paused for an interlude from the Psalms earlier in this course, a number of the specific psalms that we have used have involved moments of crisis, or at least intense feeling, but not all prayer is like that. In fact, much of the life of prayer, like much of life, is mundane (in its etymological sense of “day to day”), ordinary, and plain.
 - B.** Like the Psalter as a whole, the wisdom psalms cover a considerable range of possible situations, including angst, contrition, puzzlement, gratitude, and wonder.
- II. Psalm 119 [118] on the love of God's law.**
 - A.** In light of the close connections that we are seeing between biblical wisdom literature and the covenant, I would like to use this lecture for consideration of the psalm that is particularly devoted to the law, Psalm 119 [118].
 - B.** This is not only the longest of all the psalms (176 verses) but also the most formal in its structures. Each of its eight-verse sections corresponds to one of the letters of the alphabet, from aleph to tau.
 - C.** What we find in a psalm like this is a prayerful approach to living devoutly. It is a prayer praising God for providing such splendid laws for his people to live by.

- D. Within each stanza, each of the eight verses begins with the same Hebrew letter. Most translations dare not even attempt to reproduce this structural feature.

III. Praying this psalm.

- A. In praying this psalm, it is highly appropriate to cultivate the same sort of humility that the psalmist has.
- B. In accord with one of the deep concerns of the sapiential tradition, the psalmist has a holy fear of the LORD—not a servile fear, but a mature one—wanting to honor his God and never disappoint him, but quite mindful of weakness.
- C. In public prayer with the Psalms, there is often a practice of having groups alternate the stanzas. This lets us speak some of the words and listen to some of the words. Mindful of the importance of local traditions in this matter, my only suggestion is that it can be helpful for everyone to grow used to a steady but relatively slow pace, and to allow for some moments of silence.

IV. Praying for wisdom.

- A. Repeatedly during the psalm, there are references to the quest for truth and insight. The more the psalmist ponders the Torah, the more he knows that God and his law are deeply true and yet how much more there is to understand.
- B. It is not simply a request for factual information. It is a request really to understand God's law, for God is good, and what God has done is good.
- C. C. S. Lewis notes how similar Psalm 19 [18] is to Psalm 119 [118] in this respect. After six verses about the orderly nature of God's cosmos and five about proper fear of the LORD and respect for God's law, the last four raise up a personal prayer.

V. Other suggestions in praying for wisdom.

- A. Within the prophets, there are many passages that pertain to wisdom. Let me mention just one from Isaiah that has had importance not only for Judaism but also within Christianity, which has a tradition of seeing in the prophecy about the Messiah contained in Isaiah 11:2 the biblical source for its doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

- B. Interestingly, the Septuagint translation of this passage uses “piety” (*eusebeia*) for the first of the two references to “fear of the LORD” in the Masoretic text, and this is the origin of the Christian notion that there are specifically seven such gifts.
- C. One will find other references to a number of other gifts associated with the Spirit in various parts of the New Testament, including 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, Ephesians 4:11–12, and Romans 12:6–8.
- D. In traditional Christian teaching, these gifts (usually listed as wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and fear of the LORD) are part of what Jesus Christ as the Messiah shares with those who become his adopted sisters and brothers sacramentally in baptism and confirmation.
- E. One suggestion is to consider praying in the style of the psalms that we have been considering in this lecture, Psalms 119 [118] and 19 [18], for the gifts of the Spirit when we find ourselves in some special need.

VI. In the next lecture we will continue with the turn to Christian themes in the wisdom tradition by considering Jesus as wisdom teacher.

Suggested Reading:

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*, 400–417.

Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, chap. 6.

Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What does it mean “to love the law”? How could one foster such devotion?
2. Psalm 119 [118] speaks both of God’s justice and God’s mercy. How do you understand divine justice and divine mercy?
3. What is meant by “the gifts of the Spirit”? What forms do they take in daily life?

Lecture Thirty-Three

Jesus as Wisdom Teacher

Scope: We will focus here on Jesus of Nazareth as a wisdom teacher and as embodying divine wisdom. Christians understand him to be the second person of the Trinity, the divine Son of God the Father, and the Word of God. This lecture will present a brief overview of Christian teaching in this regard and will concentrate on the continuity between the way in which Jesus presents himself in the Gospels and the figure of the wisdom teacher that we have been studying throughout this course. We will also consider the focus of the Gospels on the death and resurrection of Jesus in relation to the treatment of death and resurrection in the book discussed in previous lectures, the Wisdom of Solomon.

Outline

- I.** Jesus as wisdom teacher.
 - A.** The Gospels show us the person of Jesus Christ—they recount his life story, his words and deeds (some of them miraculous), and his message, the proclamation of the kingdom of God.
 - B.** For the purposes of this course, I will concentrate on Jesus as the Wisdom of God and on Jesus as a teacher of divine wisdom. But it will be helpful to make some general points first.
 - C.** Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God who took on our human nature for the sake of our salvation from sin and death. We understand God to be one in being or essence but also to be a trinity of persons: God the Father, God the Son (often called the Word of God), and God the Holy Spirit.
 - D.** It is Christians' belief that God so loved the world (John 3:16) that the Father sent his only Son to become one like us, and ultimately to suffer for us, to die, to rise, and thereby to redeem the human race and offer every person the invitation to salvation, to life eternal with God.
 - E.** Even if a person does not have faith in the divinity of Christ, an open-minded hearing of his words may well lead to an appreciation for his wisdom.

- F. As utterly innocent, he is thus the epitome of one who is unfairly made to suffer. He offers up that suffering and truly dies for us who are sinners. As the moment of that offering, Christians look to the incident at the very beginning of what is called his public life, around age 30, when he goes out to the River Jordan, where John, his cousin, is preaching that people should repent their sins and be baptized.
- G. Christians understand by the symbolic action of John baptizing Jesus that the innocent and divine person of Jesus is at this moment taking upon himself all the sins of the world.
- H. This moment is also understood to be the consecration of Jesus as the long promised Messiah, a Hebrew word that is translated into Greek as *christos* and into English as “Christ.” It means “the anointed one”—the one anointed by God for a divine mission.

II. The place of the Gospels in the New Testament.

- A. The Greek term used to translate the Hebrew word for covenant (*berith*) is *diatheke*. In Latin, it is *testamentum*, which generates the words we use for the two parts of the Christian Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- B. At the heart of the New Testament are the four canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- C. What is more relevant for us here is that the canonical Gospels seem to have been commissioned precisely to write down more accurate accounts of Jesus’s life, as one can see, for instance, in the preface to the Gospel of Luke (1:1–4).
- D. In addition to the Gospels, the New Testament includes another historical book known as Acts of the Apostles that records the earliest days of the church, with special emphasis on Peter and Paul; and then various letters (Epistles) by Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude; plus the letter to the Hebrews; and finally the book of Revelation (also known as Apocalypse).
- E. As with the writings we considered from the Old Testament, there are various kinds of scholarly problems with the transmission of the Greek texts, with the identification of specific books as divinely inspired and appropriate for inclusion in the canon, and with translations. I will be using the Revised Standard Version.

III. Jesus and the wisdom tradition: continuity and novelty.

- A.** What one finds in the Gospels is an account of many things that Jesus did and many things that he said. The sayings take various forms: conversations, homilies, parables, short sayings (sometimes rather like the proverbs), and lengthy speeches.
- B.** There are a fair number of places where Christ himself comments about the connection between the old and new covenants, including an incident reported in all three of the Synoptic Gospels that uses the marital imagery that we noticed in the Song of Songs. He portrays himself as the long-awaited bridegroom who has now arrived.
- C.** In addition to stressing the continuity of the covenant relationship, Jesus also emphasizes that there is something new—that salvation comes now in his own person.

IV. Suffering, death, and resurrection.

- A.** Throughout our study of wisdom literature, we noted the tremendous problem of apparent injustice that is presented by the death of the young and the virtuous, the triumphs of the wicked during this life, and other comparable cases.
- B.** In such books as Daniel and the Wisdom of Solomon as well as in some of the psalms, divine revelation seems to be pointing toward the resolution of the problem in terms of life after death and God's eternal justice.
- C.** The suffering and death of Jesus is a preeminent example of unjust suffering of one who is innocent. But at the heart of the Christian story is the resurrection of Christ, which Christians understand as the conquest of death by the power of God.
- D.** The Christian understanding is that in addition to the judgment that individuals can expect after death, there will also be a last judgment at which the book of life will be opened and God will rectify all things.

V. With this introduction in mind, we will turn in the next lecture to the person of Jesus as teaching wisdom through his parables, and then in the following lecture to the Sermon on the Mount.

Suggested Reading:

The Apocryphal New Testament.

Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth.*

Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus.*

Questions to Consider:

1. What does Jesus mean when he says that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it?
2. How is the biblical idea of “covenant” related to the idea of “testament”?
3. What is meant by the term “messiah”?

Lecture Thirty-Four

Jesus and the Wisdom Stories in the Gospels

Scope: One of the recurrent features of the life of Jesus recounted in the Gospels is his frequent habit of telling wisdom stories in the form of parables. This lecture will give a general orientation to the structure of the four Gospels and then focus on the parables. After offering some reflections on the nature of parables as a genre of wisdom story, this lecture will propose a classification of the various parables found in the Gospels, along with more detailed study of some representative samples, including the parable of the sower and the seed, the parable of the good Samaritan, and the parable of the prodigal son.

Outline

- I. The parable as a wisdom story.
 - A. As we have seen throughout our survey of biblical wisdom literature, there are various genres that have proven useful: proverbs, drama, extended conversations, history. One of those most typical for Jesus is the parable. The Gospels contain more than 40 parables.
 - B. A parable is a brief story to illustrate some teaching or lesson. Although the use of the parable (in Hebrew, *mashal*) is relatively limited in the Old Testament, many such parables are found in the Talmud and in the Midrash.
 - C. While the category of *mashal* encompasses a wide variety of genres besides the parable, the parable (taken more narrowly) tends to be a quite simple illustration by way of comparison.
 - D. There have been periods in the history of scriptural interpretation that regarded all parables as allegorical. There certainly are passages that put an allegorical interpretation of a given parable on the lips of Jesus, but I would caution against any insistence that this is always the case.
 - E. There are various ways of classifying the parables of Jesus. One way to do this makes use of the chief function of each kind.

II. Jesus's use of parables.

- A.** In all three of the synoptic Gospels, we find the answer that Jesus gave to the question about why he preached in parables. It is admittedly mysterious.
- B.** The better interpretation, I think, depends on reading them in light of the passage that he cites here from the prophet Isaiah and from his own life. It is a passage in which the prophet Isaiah laments his failure—not surprising, for prophets inveigh against prevailing opinions in which people are very comfortable.
- C.** Presumably it is for precisely this reason that the comment on why he preaches in parables comes here, just before his allegorical explanation of the parable of the sower, in which those sowing the seed are preaching the kingdom of God.
- D.** What the parable form often does is allow the expression of wisdom through paradoxes—those apparent contradictions that require us to think through the words and the story to a deeper point than the story at first seems to express, and one that our rationalism might have disinclined us to accept.

III. Let's consider some other parables of Jesus that are rightly famous for being distillations of the distinctive wisdom that is his, the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32).

- A.** When a scholar of the law tries to test Jesus by asking him what he needs to do to gain eternal life, he already knows what the Bible has to say. Jesus turns the question back on the scholar, who then combines the directive from Deuteronomy 6:5 with that of Leviticus 19:8 in a formulation that Jesus heartily approves.
- B.** What elicits from Jesus the parable is the follow-up question on how this is to be applied in practical life by consideration about just who this “neighbor” is: another member of one's own community? Or does it also include the foreigner?
- C.** The mercy that the parable has the Samaritan show leads to the quite unexpected conclusion that the needs of another require that I must become a neighbor, whether I feel like it or not, in order to observe the law.

- D. What provokes the parable of the prodigal son, his unforgiving brother, and the father who would try to reconcile them is the way in which some Pharisees and scribes were “murmuring” against Jesus’s practice of eating with tax collectors and other sinners.
 - E. According to the story, the younger brother gets his father to advance him his share of the inheritance and runs off to squander it on a life of wine, women, and song.
 - F. Within his conscience, the young man realizes that he needs to repent his offense against his father and hope for at least a position in his father’s household where he can work like a hired hand. His father kisses him and embraces him and has the fatted calf killed for a feast to welcome the prodigal son back.
- IV. The text of Luke moves on to other parables: the dishonest steward (16:1–13) and the case of Lazarus and Dives (16:19–31), both of which also bear on the situation then before Jesus in the persons of the Pharisees and the tax collectors.
- A. From our viewpoint in considering Jesus’s use of parables for his distinctive wisdom teaching, the point is presumably clear: There is need for justice and for mercy. Not only are they not opposed, they are both necessary. There is no excuse for injustice, and the rupture of social relations involved in sin must be restored.
 - B. The parables, in my judgment, are fundamental to the divine perspective of Christ’s wisdom. They present the message in unforgettable ways. In the next lecture we will turn to one of Jesus’s most famous sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, to see him teaching his wisdom in the form of a lengthy discourse.

Suggested Reading:

Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, chap. 7.

Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*.

Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why does Jesus use parables for the communication of his message?
2. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” How do you understand “neighbor”? What obligation is there here? If there are limits to that obligation, what are they?
3. In the story of the prodigal son, does the older brother have any right to complain to his father of injustice?

Lecture Thirty-Five

Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount

Scope: We have seen that one of the most important aspects of biblical wisdom literature is its ethical dimension, often as connected to the problem of innocent suffering and the rectification of injustice. This lecture will concentrate on the Sermon on the Mount as the paradigmatic instance of Jesus as wisdom teacher. It will examine his presentation of the Beatitudes, including the echoes of earlier portions of biblical wisdom literature in these sayings, and analyze the structure of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount in light of the traditional questions and concerns of biblical wisdom literature in the areas of virtues and vices, the gifts of divine grace, and the summons for the proper use of human freedom in response.

Outline

- I. The Sermon on the Mount.
 - A. After the arrest of John the Baptist, the Gospel of Matthew presents a very short account of the beginnings of Jesus's public ministry with a focus on the message "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17) and the calling of the first disciples.
 - B. Immediately following that, we have three chapters that present the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:27), in which Jesus appears as a wisdom teacher—one in the tradition of Moses and Solomon, but greater than they, with the special authority that comes from his divinity as the Son of God.
 - C. In choosing to go up onto a mountain and sit as his disciples surround him, Jesus assumes the posture of teaching authority, presumably with allusion to rabbis who teach from the chair of Moses but as one who gives this teaching to everyone who will accept his teaching and become his disciple.
 - D. The major parts of this discourse are as follows:
 - 1. The Beatitudes (5:3–12).
 - 2. Proclaiming a renewal of Torah and an authoritative interpretation (5:17–48).
 - 3. Practical applications: new and old (6:1–34).
 - 4. Examples: freshness and continuity (7:1–27).

II. Jesus as a new Moses and a new Solomon.

- A. It is a mistake, I think, to present the Beatitudes as if they replaced the Decalogue with some new teaching that is discontinuous with the Torah. Nowhere does Jesus do anything other than affirm the 10 Commandments.
- B. If anything, the Beatitudes echo the kind of blessings promised in some of the texts that we have studied, such as Psalm 1, which begins by calling “blessed” or “happy” those who obey the law of God.
- C. The Beatitudes that follow list the conditions for those who would be the disciples of Jesus, and in fact they give a picture of Jesus himself.

III. Some further detail.

- A. In Luke’s version, the first Beatitude reads: “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20b), while Matthew has it “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).
- B. What Christians have long comprehended from this passage is the need for coming to see that one’s riches are not one’s salvation. What is required instead is vigorous work for justice, both individually and socially, and for charity in taking care of the needs of the poor.
- C. When the second Beatitude speaks of mourning, it is sometimes taken to be referring to mourning over the death of dear ones whom we have lost, but there is also a long tradition of taking it to refer rather to mourning for our sins. In short, we must endure pain in bidding farewell to that which is wrong or wicked and yet we have loved or gotten used to it.
- D. The third Beatitude echoes Psalm 37 [36]:11. Once again, there may be an allusion here to the *anawim* who were left behind on the land when Judah’s conquerors carted off the elite to exile in Babylon. It could also evoke the figure of Moses, and it is certainly a portrait of Christ himself.
- E. We could meditate with profit on each of the other Beatitudes in much the same way, but for the purposes of considering the whole of the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus’s wisdom address, let us turn briefly to the rest of his discourse.

IV. The Torah of the Messiah.

- A. The other three parts of the sermon (5:17–7:27) present the law of Christ. One can see a number of the writings of Saint Paul—for instance, in both Romans and Galatians—as efforts to understand and explain the doctrine that is presented here.
- B. While the parts of the law that deal with ritual, ceremony, and custom are subject to change, the core that is the Decalogue is entirely preserved.
- C. In the course of the sermon, the wisdom teaching that Jesus does includes his authoritative interpretation of what some of the commandments of the Decalogue entail. We also learn a pattern of prayer.
- D. While asserting the authority to modify disciplinary aspects of the ceremonial part of the law, Jesus deepens our understanding of the Decalogue.
- E. The Sermon on the Mount even includes a brief reference to the covenant with Noah that we discussed in connection with the problem of the suffering of the innocent.
- F. The ethical demands that are specified here and throughout the sermon will severely try anyone's resources—in fact, they will presumably exceed everyone's native resources.
- G. Within the Sermon on the Mount, this same point is made when Jesus teaches his disciples the prayer that we know as the LORD's Prayer, or the Our Father. Like the psalms that we saw to be deeply connected with other parts of wisdom literature, we should see its seven petitions as prayers for the grace needed to accept the wisdom teaching of Jesus, to ask for the graces we need, and to be ready even for difficult tasks like the requirement of being ready to forgive if we expect to be forgiven.

Suggested Reading:

Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, esp. chap. 5.

Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you understand the Beatitudes: as ideals or as obligations of the Christian life?

2. The Gospels contain many discussions of forgiveness in addition to the important lines on this subject in the LORD's Prayer. How, for instance, do you understand the discussion between Jesus and Peter about the need to forgive not just 7 times but 70 times 7 times and the accompanying parable about the master and the debtor? (See Matthew 18:21–35.)
3. What is distinctive about Jesus's way of handling the question of innocent suffering in his allusion to the covenant with Noah (God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike)?

Lecture Thirty-Six

Overview of Biblical Wisdom Literature

Scope: This lecture reviews the main themes of the course, beginning with the place of the sapiential books within the Bible and then reflecting on the question of what “wisdom” means within biblical wisdom literature. We will focus on three areas of significance: wisdom as divine wisdom (what God wants teach us); wisdom as what nature, cosmos, and creatures have to teach us; and wisdom as human wisdom (the understanding achieved through human effort about human nature and human behavior).

Outline

- I.** Wisdom literature as part of the Bible.
 - A.** The effort to understand the traditions of divine revelation that are involved in Judaism and Christianity necessarily involves coming to know the scriptures.
 - B.** Both the synagogue and the church have sophisticated ideas about which texts make up the Bible. They share a reverence for the Torah, for the Prophets, and for other writings such as the Psalms and the sapiential literature that we have been studying in this course.
 - C.** What Christianity recognizes as the biblical New Testament stands in a profound continuity with what came before, whether we think of this as the Hebrew Bible or as the Old Testament (and thus a canon that includes a few additional documents that are not in Hebrew but are connected to the chosen people of Israel).
 - D.** The sapiential books are an important part of the Bible. They are in some respects different in kind from the others but in many respects deeply connected to the rest.
- II.** What does “wisdom” mean?
 - A.** The texts of biblical wisdom literature give us this first sense of “wisdom” very strongly in the many assertions that the covenant and the law are divine wisdom.
 - B.** It is wisdom for orienting one’s life: that, above all, adoration and praise is owed to God.

- C. It is likewise wisdom for living one's daily life. The second tablet of the Decalogue not only spells out individual duties and prohibitions but also provides a pattern for peaceful life within a community.
- D. An important sense of "wisdom" here is the notion of what we can come to understand by looking at what God has made: the cosmos as a whole, the nature of various creatures in the cosmos, and human nature in particular.
- E. While biblical wisdom literature does not offer us a systematic picture of the cosmos or the natures of various creatures in the way that philosophy and the sciences have tried to do, there is nonetheless respect for that type of inquiry.
- F. Connected to the second sense of "wisdom," and especially to the concern about knowledge of human nature, is a third distinct sense of "wisdom" as human wisdom.
- G. There is also the wisdom that comes from questioning—in fact, from pressing hard questions to the limits of one's imagination. The book of Job strikes me as exemplifying this sense of "wisdom."
- H. These are questions that come readily to the human heart, and the Bible's sapiential literature gives voice to those questions and then really debates them, and really invites us to join the debate.
- I. To provide compassion may mean readying ourselves to offer personal care and real help to those in suffering. This too is something about which we need to have practical wisdom.
- J. It is erroneous to think that all suffering is a payback for guilt, and in this Job's friends need to be corrected. What they should be praised for is their compassion in sitting and accompanying their friend.

III. Prayer and reflection.

- A. As interludes during our course, we turned from time to time to the Psalter and considered a number of psalms that are collectively called the wisdom psalms. These are forms of prayer that are open to believer and to searcher alike.

- B. Happily, the poetry of the Hebrew psalms is based not on rhythm or rhyme but on balance and opposition, and so these psalms are easily translatable into any language. They are a prayer book for religious communities and individuals, for believers and those who are still searching.
- C. In the Wisdom of Solomon, the figure of King Solomon shows the wisdom for which he is known, in my judgment, when he informs his fellow kings that his reputation for wisdom is not simply the result of his native abilities. Rather, he asserts, it is a gift that he has received. He then reminds his colleagues of the need that he had to pray for wisdom, and he shows them a way in which to do so.
- D. Whatever our individual abilities or accomplishments or experiences, there is the need to be receptive for wisdom to grow. Part of that receptivity means leaving time in our lives for reflection, and being open to assistance. There is good reason to follow Solomon's example in raising mind and heart in prayer, asking for the gift of wisdom.
- E. Allow me a personal note here at the end of the course, to thank you for joining me on this journey through biblical wisdom literature. I hope that it has been helpful to you, and I wish you blessings as you continue this journey.

Suggested Reading:

Duggan, *The Consuming Fire*.

Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*.

Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Having now considered many biblical texts on the problem of suffering, how do you see the question? Is it correct to say that suffering is inescapable in a world in which there are free creatures?
2. All considered, what is the relation between Torah and wisdom? How does the covenant between God and the chosen people bear on the question of wisdom?
3. Who are the people in your life whom you especially esteem as wise? Where does their wisdom seem to come from? Do they fit into the three categories suggested here?

Chronology of Important Figures and Events

Since there is much scholarly debate about the dating of the events in the earlier parts of this timeline, it is impossible to provide specific dates in many cases. This chronology will use the abbreviation “c.” (circa) for “about,” “fl.” (floruit) for designating a date that is likely to have been within the time of the individual’s maturity, and “d.” for “died.” There are many other figures from biblical history who might have been included here. This list concentrates on those who are mentioned in the course of this set of lectures on biblical wisdom literature. It also includes the dates for other figures discussed during these lectures.

Adam and Eve: According to Genesis, the first man and the first woman. Created by God; dates unknown.

Cain and Abel: The first children of Adam and Eve; dates unknown.

Noah: The figure whom God commanded to make the ark in order to survive the flood. Dates unknown.

Abraham: Called by God c. 1850 B.C. to be the father of the chosen people, with his wife Sarah; although they were for long years childless, God gave them a child, Isaac, in their old age.

Isaac: Son of Abraham and Sarah, husband of Rebecca.

Jacob: Twin brother of Esau, son of Isaac and Rebecca, husband of Rachel and Leah. Heir of the promises made to Abraham, progenitor of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Joseph: The 11th son of Jacob; his role in the history of the chosen people is described in Genesis 37–50 (fl. 1650 B.C.).

The slavery of the chosen people in Egypt: The precise dates of the captivity in Egypt are much debated; the period extends from the death of Joseph to the Exodus at the time of Moses.

Moses: Raised up by God to lead the chosen people out of slavery in Egypt (fl. 1250 B.C.).

Exodus: The liberation of the chosen people from Egypt. The date for this event may have been during the reign of Ramses II (1279–1213 B.C.).

The Instruction of Amen-em-ope (Egypt): A document from the tradition of wisdom literature in Egypt, probably composed c. 1200 B.C.

Saul: The first king of the ancient kingdom of Israel, reigned c. 1047–c. 1007 B.C. (See 1 Samuel 9:1–10:16).

David: The second king of the ancient kingdom of Israel (c. 1037–967 B.C.). He reigned over Judah c. 1007–1000 B.C. and then over Judah and Israel together c. 1000–967 B.C.

Nathan: A prophet at the court of King David (fl. 1000 B.C.).

Solomon: Third king of ancient Israel; born c. 1000 B.C., reigned from c. 971–931 B.C.; builder of the First Temple.

Proverbs: At least some portions of this book seem to come from the time of David and Solomon (10th century B.C.), but the final editing seems to have happened considerably later.

First Temple of Jerusalem: Completed in the 10th century B.C. and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Rehoboam: Son of Solomon, and thus the third king of the house of David; he ruled over the kingdom of Judah from 931–c. 913 B.C.

Jeroboam: Son of Nebat of Ephraim, ruled over the breakaway Northern Kingdom of Israel c. 931–910 B.C.

Elisha: The disciple of Elijah and his divinely appointed successor as prophet, mid-9th century B.C.

The exile: The 10 northern tribes of Israel went into exile in 721 B.C., and the 2 southern tribes of Judah did so in 587 B.C. The return to Palestine took place in 539 B.C. at the command of King Cyrus of Persia.

Hezekiah: Ruled as King of Judah c. 715–687 B.C.

Josiah: Ruled as King of Judah c. 640–609 B.C.

Book of Job: Perhaps from the 7th century B.C., but the date is disputed. Some date it as early as the time of David and Solomon, but others tend to date it from the time of the exile.

Book of Qoheleth: Although the date of composition is disputed, prevalent scholarly opinion holds that this book was composed sometime after the return from the exile in 539 B.C.

Song of Songs: Also called the Canticle of Canticles; its date of composition is unknown, but it may come from the 5th century B.C.

Joshua: Jewish high priest after the restoration of the temple; reigned c. 516–490 B.C.

Second Temple: The reconstructed Temple at Jerusalem stood from c. 516 B.C. to A.D. 70.

Wisdom of Solomon: A late part of biblical wisdom literature. Very difficult to date; estimates range from 220 B.C. to A.D. 50.

Simon II: Jewish high priest who served from c. 219 to 196 B.C.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes: Seleucid king who lived from c. 215 to 164 B.C.

Sirach: Also called Ben-Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, this book was composed in Hebrew between 200 and 175 B.C. and then translated by the author's grandson into Greek at some point after 132 B.C.

Onias III: A Jewish high priest mentioned in 2 Maccabees (d. 170 B.C.).

King Ptolemy VIII Physikon Euergetes II: He reigned over Egypt from 170 to 163 B.C., then shared rule with his brother Philometor until 145 B.C., and then reigned solely again from 145 to 117 B.C.

Book of Daniel: Composed c. 165 B.C.

Pompey the Great: Roman general, lived 106–48 B.C.

Philo of Alexandria: Great Jewish philosopher and biblical exegete, lived c. 20 B.C.–A.D. 50.

John the Baptist: The cousin of Jesus of Nazareth, lived c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 26.

Jesus of Nazareth: For Christians, the eternal Son of God who became incarnate by taking on human nature as a child in the womb of the Virgin Mary in c. 4 B.C. He was crucified c. A.D. 29. Christians believe that he then rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. The traditional system of dating the years in terms of B.C. and A.D. had regarded the year of his birth as the year 1, but modern investigations into chronology have made it increasingly clear that the 33 years of his life must be dated slightly earlier than the traditional dates.

Destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70): The Roman obliteration of the city of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple.

Council of Jamnia (A.D. 90): A gathering of Jewish scholars concerned about the biblical canon.

Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180): Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, author of *Meditations*.

Jerome (c. A.D. 347–420): Christian scholar who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin.

Augustine (A.D. 354–430): Christian theologian and bishop of Hippo.

Boethius (c. A.D. 480–524): Roman statesman and philosopher, author of the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Avicenna (A.D. 980–1037): Islamic philosopher and theologian from Persia.

Maimonides (1135–1204): Medieval Jewish philosopher, author of the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Averroës (1126–1198): Islamic philosopher from Córdoba, Spain.

Aquinas (1224–1274): Christian philosopher and theologian.

Dante (1265–1321): Author of the *Divine Comedy*.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556): Spiritual writer and founder of the Society of Jesus.

Shakespeare, William (1564–1616): English playwright.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1646–1716): German statesman and philosopher, author of *Theodicy*.

Voltaire (1694–1778): The pen name for François-Marie Arouet, author of *Candide*.

Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804): German philosopher.

Blake, William (1757–1827): Poet and painter whose work includes illustrations of the book of Job.

Newman, John Henry, Cardinal (1801–1890): British theologian, author of “Lead, Kindly Light.”

Dickens, Charles (1812–1870): English novelist.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900): German philosopher.

Thompson, Francis (1859–1907): British poet, author of the poem “The Hound of Heaven.”

Williams, Ralph Vaughan (1872–1958): British composer.

MacLeish, Archibald (1892–1982): American poet.

Hartshorne, Charles (1897–2000): American process philosopher.

Lewis, c. S. (1898–1963): British literary scholar and Christian apologist, author of *The Problem of Pain*.

Wojtyła, Karol (1920–2005): Pope John Paul II.

Glossary

Aaronite priesthood: A line of Jewish priests descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses, charged with various duties related to the offering of sacrifice.

acrostic: A poem structured to have subsequent lines begin with the next letter of the alphabet.

Adonai: A Hebrew term meaning “LORD” that is substituted in the reading of a Hebrew text when the tetragrammaton appears.

alliteration: Repetition of the same consonant sound.

anawim: In Hebrew, “the remnant”—a reference to those left behind in Palestine during the Babylonian captivity.

aptharsia: The Greek term for “incorruptibility.”

apocalyptic: From the Greek term that means “revelation,” a genre of biblical writing that often focuses on divine judgment and end times.

apocrypha: A general term used to designate books that are not regarded as part of the biblical canon but nonetheless respected for their antiquity and their connection to a religious tradition. *See also* **deuterocanonical**.

apostles: Those disciples of Jesus whom he appointed as the official witnesses to his resurrection and whom he commissioned to begin spreading the Gospel throughout the world.

Ashkenazic Judaism: A form of Judaism that originated in the Rhineland during the Middle Ages, with distinctive liturgical practices.

assonance: Repetition of the same vowel sound.

athanasia: The Greek term for “immortality.”

augury: A practice for trying to determine the future and to ascertain favorable omens, widely practiced in the ancient world but condemned by the Hebrew prophets.

autograph copy: The original manuscript.

Babylonian captivity: The period of exile, beginning in 721 B.C. for the 10 northern tribes of the Kingdom of Israel and in 587 B.C. for the 2 southern tribes of the Kingdom of Judah, that was brought to an end by King Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C.

Beatitudes: The sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels of Matthew (5:3–12) and Luke (6:20–26) that begin “Blessed are ...” These sayings are signature aspects of the wisdom of Jesus, but they echo various passages in the Old Testament such as Psalm 37 [36]:11 and Isaiah 61:1–2.

berith: The Hebrew term for “covenant.”

Bible: The collection of sacred scriptures. *See also* Hebrew Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, apocrypha, deuterocanonical.

Booths, Feast of: Also called “Feast of Tabernacles.” In Hebrew, Sukkoth. The seven-day biblical harvest festival associated with pilgrimage, celebrated beginning the 15th of Tishrei (late September or October). *See* Leviticus 23:33–43 and John 7:10–26.

canon: The officially recognized collection of sacred books. The term comes from the Greek term *kanon*, which means “rule.”

cantillation: Singing and chanting.

catharsis: In Greek, “purification.” A term used in literary criticism of Greek tragedy for the cleansing of emotions such as pity and fear brought about in the characters and/or the audience.

Catholic Church: One of the largest Christian communions, comprised of the Western, or Latin, rite (called the Roman Catholic Church) and 22 Eastern Catholic Churches, governed by the Pope, with bishops whose lineage can be traced back to the apostles.

Christ: From the Greek term *christos*, which translates the Hebrew term *messiah*—literally, “the anointed one.” A title applied to Jesus of Nazareth, designed to designate him as the one specially anointed by God as the Messiah.

conditional logic: The sort of argumentation that proceeds by the affirmation or denial of some fact to a hypothesis so as to derive a conclusion.

conscience: In general, the power within an individual to reflect and make moral judgments, both retrospectively on prior action and prospectively on actions being considered for the future.

contemplation: A form of mental prayer that often makes use of one's memory and imagination to lift the mind and heart to God.

covenant: A special form of contract or agreement that is made to form a relationship of particularly strong unity and intimacy; the term is used of human marriages as well as of the relationship between God and the chosen people and between Christ and the church.

decatalogue: The 10 Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, found in Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

deuterocanonical: A technical term that means “second canon” and designates those books regarded as part of the biblical canon by some traditions but as apocryphal by others.

Diaspora: The dispersal of the chosen people to various lands when they were forced to leave Palestine.

diatheke: The Greek term used to translate the Hebrew term *berith*, meaning “covenant.”

discernment: The process by which to determine the meaning of a text or an experience.

divination: The practice common in ancient religions for trying to ascertain favorable omens; condemned by the Hebrew prophets.

divine right of kings: A political theory of the early modern period of history by which sovereigns claimed to root their authority in will of God, associated especially with the Stuart and Caroline houses of Great Britain.

dramatic fallacy: When interpreting a literary text, the mistake of simply supposing without sufficient evidence that the words of a fictional character present the author's position on a given issue.

dream vision: An experience of some memorable encounter during sleep, such as those recorded in the book of Daniel.

Dualism: A philosophical approach whose essential feature is recourse to some pair of copinciples.

Elohim: The most common Hebrew term for “God.”

Epicureanism: A school of philosophy originated in Greece by Epicurus that identified pleasure as the goal of life and that made the promotion of pleasure and the reduction of pain the main criterion for decision making, usually with various distinctions between long-term and short-term pleasures, the relative intensity and quality of pleasures, and so on.

epilogue: A section added at the end of a work to bring matters to a conclusion or to offer a reflection on what has taken place.

eschatology: The part of theology devoted to end times, including questions about events to be expected at the conclusion of history and about divine judgment, as well as questions about personal survival after bodily death.

exegete: An interpreter; a commentator on a text.

exhortation: Words of encouragement.

faith: In general, belief; usually said with regard to belief in God and often associated with what is standard belief in a given religious tradition.

fallacy: An error in reasoning.

fatalism: An attitude or belief that one's destiny is fixed in advance.

fear of the LORD: Deep respect for God and an unwillingness to offend the divine will. In biblical wisdom literature, this is called the beginning of wisdom.

Fideism: An approach to life and belief that emphasizes faith over reason. This sometimes includes a suspicion that human reason is incapable of discovering the answer to crucial life questions and an inclination to regard divine revelation alone as sufficient for answering those questions.

genre: Literary type; this term is used to distinguish among various kinds of writing on the basis of literary structure.

goel: A Hebrew term for “redeemer” or “avenger.”

Gospel: The term in English for the narratives about the life of Jesus in the New Testament.

Hallel: Literally, “praise,” this is the Hebrew word that is usually translated into English as “alleluia.”

Hasidim: A Jewish religious movement named from the Hebrew term *hesed*, which means “loving kindness.”

hebel: Literally, “breath”; the Hebrew word that is often translated as “vanity.”

Hebrew Bible: The set of biblical books written in Hebrew.

hedonist: Pleasure-seeker. Hedonism is a school of philosophy that regards pleasure as the highest good possible for human life.

Hellenization: The process of assimilation to Greek culture.

hokma: The Hebrew term for “wisdom.”

Holy Spirit: In Christian usage, the name for the third person of the Holy Trinity.

Holy Trinity: A term in Christian usage to designate the mystery of there being three persons in one God (Father, Son or Word, and Holy Spirit).

immanent eschatology: A theological view that emphasizes this world rather than some other (postmortal) world as the place where God’s plan will be realized.

immortality: Literally, deathlessness; usually said of the soul, to indicate ongoing personal survival after bodily death.

incarnation: Literally, the taking on of flesh. It is the term in Christian usage for the assumption of a human nature by the second person of the Holy Trinity; the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary is often described as “the incarnation of the Word.”

incorruptibility: The state of being unable to be corrupted or destroyed; usually said of the body after resurrection from the dead.

kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven: Terms especially associated with the preaching of Jesus to designate the new age that his coming was designed to bring about.

kyrios: Greek term for “LORD.”

lev: Hebrew term for “heart.”

Levite: A member of the Hebrew tribe of Levi, charged with certain religious duties, including the singing of psalms during temple services as well as various construction and maintenance tasks in the temple.

liturgy of the hours: In Christian usage, the official order of prayers to be offered at various times during each day, consisting primarily of psalms and supplemented by various hymns, readings from scripture, and other prayers.

Logos: A Greek term with many interrelated meanings, often used in the New Testament as “Word” to designate the second person of the Holy Trinity.

***marshal*:** The Hebrew term for a parable or riddle.

***meden agan*:** Literally, “nothing too much”; a phrase from Greek ethics used to express the idea that virtue consists in moderation.

meditation: A form of mental prayer that often involves thinking about the meaning of a scriptural text and generating a personal response.

Messiah: From the Hebrew word for “anointed one,” a term used to designate someone specially appointed by God and anointed for a sacred purpose. The Greek translation of this term is *christos*, from which we get the word “Christ” in English. In Christian usage, this term refers especially to Jesus as the one anointed by God to carry out the work of redemption.

***midrash*:** In Hebrew, “study.” The term refers especially to a certain form of biblical interpretation often used for homiletic purposes.

Mizrahic Judaism: A form of Judaism originating in the Middle East, with a distinctive form of liturgical practice.

***nephesh*:** In Hebrew, “a living being”—often translated as “soul.”

New Testament: The Christian name for the part of the Bible that was written after Christ’s coming. Since the term “testament” means “covenant,” the term is intended to suggest that Christ established the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31.

***non multa, sed multum*:** Literally, “not many things, but much”; a Latin-language saying to express the idea that it is better to focus more deeply on a few things than widely on many things in a superficial way.

Old Testament: The Christian name for the part of the Bible that was written prior to the coming of Christ. The term “testament” is the English translation of the words in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek that mean “covenant.”

omnipotent: All-powerful; this is often listed as an attribute of God.

omniscient: All-knowing; this is often listed as an attribute of God.

original sin: In Christian usage, the name for the sin of Adam and Eve that resulted in their being cast out of the Garden of Eden; this is sometimes called “the Fall.” The term also refers to the wounded state of human nature inherited by all human beings subsequent to Adam and Eve.

Orthodox Church: One of the largest Christian communions in the world, composed of numerous autocephalous (self-ruled) ecclesial bodies, with bishops whose lineage can be traced back to the apostles.

parable: A short, succinct story used to illustrate some moral or religious teaching.

paradox: An apparent contradiction.

Passover: The Jewish feast commemorating God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Pentateuch: A term used for the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

political philosophy: The branch of philosophy concerned with theories of civil governance and social organization.

prayer: Some form of raising the mind and heart to God. Prayer can take many forms, including the use of set texts and community rituals as well as meditation, contemplation, and spontaneous expressions.

process philosophy/theology: A school of thought that emphasizes change and experience over form and substance in its general account of the universe; its typical approach to theodicy tends to deny the omnipotence and/or the omniscience of God.

Protestantism: A general term for various forms of Christian faith and practice that have had their origin during or since the Reformation of the 16th century.

proverb: A pithy, memorable saying; a maxim.

Psalter: The collection of psalms.

psalterion: The stringed instrument used to accompany the psalms.

purgatory: In Christian usage, a term to designate the place and the process of the soul’s purification from sin and vice, in preparation for union with God in heaven.

qahal: Literally “assembly,” it is the Hebrew word at the base of the title of the book Qoheleth, which is often translated as “The Preacher” (in Greek, Ecclesiastes).

Rabbinic Judaism: The mainstream system of Judaism after the Diaspora, once the Roman destruction of the Second Temple made it impossible to practice the religious customs and animal sacrifices prescribed for worship in the temple.

resurrection of the body: The restoration of a body to life at some point after bodily death. *See also* **immorality, incorruptibility.**

righteousness: A theological term for the rectitude of a person’s life and actions when judged to be holy and pleasing to God.

Rosh Hashanah: The Hebrew term for “new year”; see Leviticus 23:24 and Ezekiel 40:1.

ruah: In Hebrew, “breath” or “spirit”; often translated as “soul.”

sage: A person of wisdom.

sapiential: Wise; from *sapientia*, the Latin term for wisdom.

Satan: In Hebrew, “accuser.” In the books of Job and Zechariah, one who challenged God. In Christian and Muslim usage, a rebellious or fallen angel; a demon.

Sephardic Judaism: A form of Judaism that originated in the Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain) and has a distinctive form of liturgical practices.

Septuagint: The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Shaddai (or El Shaddai): A name for God in Hebrew, meaning “God Almighty.”

Sheol: The Hebrew term for the abode of the dead, the underworld. By the 2nd century B.C., it was also the name for those awaiting the resurrection of the dead or confined to torment after death as the punishment for their sins.

shivah: In Judaism, a bereavement practice that consists of a week-long period of grief and mourning that immediately follows a burial.

skepticism: A philosophical attitude of doubt, either in general about the possibility of knowledge or in particular about specific knowledge claims.

soliloquy: A relatively lengthy speech by one individual, addressed to the audience or reader rather than to some other character.

soul, spirit: Terms used to refer to what makes someone alive. These terms are used in various ways, including as a center of personal consciousness during life and as the seat of personal existence beyond death.

Stoicism: A philosophical school of thought known for its rigorous mental discipline and for its cultivation of an attitude of indifference to whatever is outside of human control.

Sukkoth: *See Booths, Feast of.*

suzerainty treaty: A technical term for a typical form of contractual association in the ancient Near East between a superior and an inferior.

synoptic: A term used to group together the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tend to have relatively close parallels in their presentation of the narrative of the life of Jesus.

Talmud: The central text of Rabbinical Judaism that records discussions on Jewish law, customs, history, and ethics. It consists of the Mishnah (the written account of Judaism's oral law) and the Gemara (a later record of discussions about the Mishnah and the TaNaK).

TaNaK: A Hebrew acronym used to identify the three parts of the Bible: *Torah*, *N'viim* (Prophets), and *Ktuvim* (Writings).

tehillim: Literally, "hymns of praise"; the Hebrew word for the Psalms.

testamentum: The Latin term for "covenant."

tetragrammaton: Literally, "the four-lettered word" when referring to the sacred name of God revealed to Moses that (out of respect) should not be pronounced: YHWH. When it occurs in a Hebrew text, the word *Adonai* (LORD) is to be pronounced instead.

theodicy: A generic name for philosophical efforts to justify the ways of God, especially in light of suffering.

theophany: A divine appearance, such as the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai.

Torah: A term of Hebrew origin for "law" that refers, in the narrowest sense, to the Decalogue, but more broadly to the books of the Bible that focus on the law: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Typikon: A liturgical book containing instructions about the order of church services, used by various Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches.

Vulgate: Saint Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible.

wisdom: In general, a term for expressing excellence in knowledge, understanding, experience, judgment, and insight. In the Bible, the term is used especially for the divine gift of such excellence but also for human efforts to achieve such excellence. The term is also used in a personified way in the various wisdom poems and in the first nine chapters of Proverbs.

wisdom poem: A term for grouping together special passages in biblical wisdom literature such as Proverbs 8, Job 28, and Sirach 24, in which the figure of Wisdom is predominant.

wisdom psalm: A term used to group together a number of psalms marked by the typical themes of biblical wisdom literature.

yad (pl. *yamin*): In Hebrew, "hand(s)."

Yom Kippur: In Jewish practice, the Day of Atonement—marked by fasting, prayer, and repentance. See Leviticus 23:27.

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